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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

سالار روزنامہ بنگلور

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BENGALURU METRO TO COVER 175KM BY DEC 2027: DKS

BENGALURU, 22 DEC

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar on Monday said that the 175km Metro line network will be operational in Bengaluru by December 2027. Shivakumar, who is also the Minister in-charge of Bengaluru Development, said this after a meeting with Bangalore Metro Rail Corporation Limited (BMRCL) officials.

"Our government is working towards easing traffic congestion in the city. Currently, 96km of Metro network is operational. We have operationalised Yellow line after we assumed office. The 24km Yellow line has a footfall of 1 lakh passengers," Shivakumar told reporters.

"We will operationalise 41km Metro network in 2026 and additional 38km, including Airport line by December 2027. With this, Bengaluru will have a Metro network of 175km. We have plans to extend the Metro line to Tavarekere, Hosakote, Bidadi, Nelamangala. A Detailed Project Report (DPR) is being prepared for this," he said. Stating that the tender, which will be called next month for 100km of Metro network under Phase 3, including double decker corridor The projected cost of Phase 3 of "Namma metro" is Rs 25,311 crore, he further said, adding that, "We are financing Rs 15,600 crore for the project through Japan International Cooperation Agency. The tender for works to the tune of Rs 9,700 crore will be called in January." —*PTI*

With zero duty on exports, India, NZ finalise trade deal

NZ will get free access to meat, wine; Will invest $20B in India

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

India and New Zealand on Monday announced the conclusion of negotiations for a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that will provide duty-free access to a wide range of goods and commit New Zealand to invest USD 20 billion in India over the next 15 years.

The agreement, expected to be signed within three months and implemented next year, aims to double bilateral trade in goods and services to USD 5 billion within five years. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon confirmed the breakthrough following a phone conversation between the two leaders.

Under the pact, India will gain duty-free access for several labour-intensive exports, including textiles, apparel, leather goods and engineering products, offering a significant boost to employment-driven sectors. In return, New Zealand will receive tariff-free entry for sheep meat, wool, coal, and over 95 per cent of forestry and wood products. Wellington will also get duty concessions on items such as kiwi fruit, wine, select seafood, cherries, avocados, persimmons, bulk infant formula, Manuka honey and milk albumins.

New Zealand Minister Todd McClay with Union Minister Piyush Goyal during a meeting in New Delhi *PHOTO: PTI*

To safeguard domestic interests, India has excluded politically sensitive sectors, particularly dairy products such as milk, cream, whey, yoghurt and cheese. Other excluded items include onions, pulses, sugar, artificial honey, edible oils, arms and ammunition, gems and jewellery, copper, aluminium and related products.

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said the FTA would strengthen supply chains, boost domestic manufacturing, attract long-term investments and generate large-scale employment. He described the pact as India's seventh major trade agreement under the NDA government, following deals with the UAE, Australia, the UK, the EFTA bloc, Oman and Mauritius. Negotiations were initiated during Luxon's visit to India in March 2025. Their conclusion in just nine months, officials said, reflects strong political will and a shared ambition to deepen economic engagement, market access and strategic cooperation between the two countries. —*PTI*

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Another B'desh student leader killed

DHAKA, 22 DEC

Unidentified gunmen on Monday shot Motaleb Shikder, a senior leader of Bangladesh's violent, student-led 2024 uprising, in the head in a targeted attack in the southwestern city of Khulna, police and party officials said.

Shikder, who heads the Khulna division of the National Citizen Party (NCP) and is a central coordinator of the party's workers' front, was rushed to Khulna Medical College Hospital (KMCH) in a critical condition. "He was shot a few minutes ago," NCP joint principal coordinator Mahmuda Mitu said in a Facebook post. Mitu, a doctor, said Shikder was undergoing emergency treatment.

The Kaler Kantha newspaper, quoting hospital sources, reported that Shikder sustained a gunshot wound to the left side of his head and was bleeding profusely when brought to the hospital. KMCH authorities later shifted him to the City Imaging Centre to assess the extent of his injuries.

The attack comes days after the killing of Sharif Osman Hadi, a prominent youth leader of last year's protests that led to the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government. Hadi was shot in the head by masked gunmen during an election campaign in Dhaka's Bijoynagar area on December 12. The 32-year-old Inqilab Mancha spokesperson, and a candidate in the February 12 general elections, died while undergoing treatment in Singapore on Thursday. Police have arrested the parents, wife and a female friend of Faisal Karim Masud, the prime suspect in Hadi's killing, but said they have no specific information about his whereabouts. After Monday's attack in Khulna's Majid Sarani area, police said they had launched an immediate manhunt but were yet to ascertain the motive. —*PTI*

>>>More on Page 6

Pregnant woman killed over inter-caste marriage in Hubballi

HUBBALI, 22 DEC

A suspected honour killing was reported from Inam Veerapur village in Hubballi Rural taluk, where a six-month pregnant woman was allegedly hacked to death by her family for marrying a man from another caste, police said on Monday. Members of the husband's family were also seriously injured in the attack.

The victim, identified as Manya Doddimani, aged 19–20, sustained severe head and abdominal injuries and was admitted to a private hospital in Hubballi. Doctors said both Manya and her unborn child succumbed to the injuries despite treatment. The husband's mother, Renavva, and his uncle remain critical and are undergoing treatment in the intensive care unit.

According to police, Manya had married Vivekanand Doddimani in May, against her family's wishes. Following threats from her relatives, the couple had moved to Haveri fearing for their lives and returned to their village on 8 December.

Police said the woman's family members first attempted to assault her husband and father-in-law while they were working in agricultural fields, but they managed to escape. The accused then allegedly barged into the house and attacked Manya and other family members using agricultural tools and pipes.

Superintendent of Police Gunjan Arya said three accused, including the woman's father, have been arrested, while preventive action has been initiated against seven to eight others. "A case has been registered at the Hubballi Rural police station. Further investigation is under way to ascertain the exact motive," she said.

Senior police officials visited the hospital, and heavy security has been deployed in the village to prevent unrest. —*Salar News*

AI plane's engine shuts down ahead of take-off

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

A Mumbai-bound Air India's Boeing 777 aircraft made an emergency landing here less than an hour after taking off due to right engine shutdown on Monday morning.

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) will conduct a probe and the civil aviation ministry has sought details from Air India about the incident.

The plane, carrying around 335 people, was airborne for nearly an hour before returning to Delhi. The aircraft made an emergency landing, the sources said.

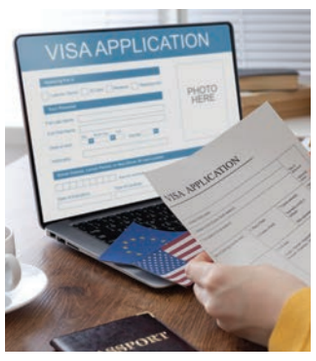
The aircraft landed safely at Delhi and the passengers and crew have disembarked, the airline said.

The civil aviation ministry said it has taken note of the Air India incident involving a technical issue shortly after take-off.

A DGCA official said the plane was involved in an air turnback as during flap retraction after take-off, the flight crew observed low engine oil pressure on the right engine (engine No.2).

"Shortly thereafter, the engine oil pressure dropped to zero. Following procedure the crew shutdown the No. 2 engine and the aircraft landed safely at Delhi. The incident would be investigated by the permanent investigation board of the Airline under the supervision of Director Air Safety (NR), DGCA," the official said. —*PTI*

CHINA LAUNCHES ONLINE VISA SYSTEM IN INDIA



NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

The Chinese Embassy in India has officially launched the China Online Visa Application System, aimed at simplifying the visa process for Indian travellers. The initiative was announced by the Chinese Ambassador to India, who confirmed that, starting today, applicants can complete visa forms and upload necessary documents online via visaforchina.cn/DEL3_EN/qianzh.

This online platform is expected to save time during the initial stages of visa processing by allowing digital submission of documentation. The Chinese Visa Application Service Centre in New Delhi will continue to assist applicants, operating Monday to Friday from 9am to 3.00pm.

As per an important notice from the Visa Application Centre, applicants must create or log into an account, complete the online form, and upload documents. They must ensure their application status shows "online review completed" before submitting their physical passport and required documents.

This development comes as the Ministry of External Affairs reported that the visa regime for tourism and business purposes for Chinese nationals is now "fully functional." —*PTI*

ONE NATION, ONE RELIGION?

MAN ATTACKS CHRISTMAS CAROL GROUP IN KERALA, ARRESTED

PALAKKAD, 22 DEC

A man was arrested for allegedly attacking a Christmas carol group in Pudussery here, police said on Monday.

The incident took place when the carol group comprising children was visiting the houses of Christians on Sunday night.

The accused was identified as Ashwin Raj.

The police said the incident occurred in an area where the RSS is considered to have a strong presence.

As per the complaint, the accused confronted the carol group and destroyed their band set and other articles.

"He is already an accused under Kerala Anti-Social Activities (Prevention) Act. In the present case, he was booked under BNS sections," a police officer said.

Police said Ashwin Raj was charged under BNS Sections 192, 115 (2) (inflicting injury voluntarily) and 110 (attempt to commit culpable homicide). —*PTI*

HURTS HINDUS: VENDORS SELLING XMAS ITEMS HARASSED IN PURI

PURI, 22 DEC

Men dressed in yellow kurtas allegedly harassed migrant vendors selling Christmas items near the Jagannath Temple, calling the goods "Christian" and claiming they offended Hindu sentiments. A viral video shows the men questioning vendors about their religion, origin and permits, and asserting Odisha was a "Hindu rashtra". The incident ended without violence. — *Salar News*

FOR 187 HOME GUARD POSTS

8,000 write govt exam on airstrip in Odisha

SAMBALPUR, 22 DEC

Thousands of candidates, who appeared for a Home Guard recruitment examination, were made to sit at an airstrip in Odisha's Sambalpur district, triggering widespread criticism and a political row over unemployment and recruitment practices in the state.

The written test, held on 16 December, saw more than 8,000 aspirants competing for just 187 Home Guard posts. Owing to the unusually large turnout, district police conducted the examination at the Sambalpur airstrip, which is rarely used for operations. Videos showing candidates seated on the ground while writing the exam have since gone viral on social media.

Visuals of thousands of aspirants seated in rows on the airstrip flooded social media. With no desks or mats provided, candidates used the airstrip's surface to write the test *PHOTO: SCREENGRAB*

According to officials, candidates reported at the venue around 6am, but question papers were distributed at 9am. The one-hour examination comprised a 20-mark paragraph writing test and a 30-mark general knowledge paper. Additional police personnel were deployed at the venue, and drones were used for aerial surveillance to ensure discipline and smooth conduct.

PTI reported that several applicants held postgraduate degrees, including MBA and MCA qualifications, despite the Home Guard post carrying a daily allowance of Rs 639. Officials said the recruitment drive reflected the high demand for government-linked employment opportunities.

The unusual venue and visuals sparked sharp political reactions. The Trinamool Congress criticised the BJP-led Odisha government, alleging it highlighted the severity of unemployment in the state. Sharing videos on social media platform X, the TMC said thousands of qualified youth were competing for limited posts, calling it a failure of "double engine" governance. —*PTI*

US to review H1B, H4 seekers' online footprint

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

PHOTO: FREEPIK

The US Embassy in India on Monday said the United States has expanded online presence reviews to all H1B and H4 visa applicants worldwide, regardless of nationality, as part of standard visa screening beginning 15 December.

The clarification comes amid the abrupt postponement of thousands of pre-scheduled H1B visa interviews in India, with many appointments pushed back by several months. In a post on X, the embassy said the vetting is being conducted "globally for all applicants of all nationalities" and is aimed at addressing abuse of the H1B programme while allowing companies to hire highly skilled foreign workers.

US embassies and consulates continue to accept and process applications, but applicants have been advised to apply early and anticipate longer processing times. The rescheduling applies to all interviews originally scheduled from 15 December 15 onwards. Some applicants who had December interviews have been reassigned dates as late as March or May.

The mass postponements have caused hardship, particularly for applicants already in India who are unable to return to the US due to expired visas. Indian professionals form one of the largest groups of H1B visa holders, especially in the technology and healthcare sectors.

The embassy reiterated that a US visa is "a privilege, not a right", noting that screening may continue even after issuance. The expanded vetting follows earlier measures requiring certain visa applicants to make social media accounts public. —*PTI*

FOR SAFETY

City Commissioner of Police Seemanth Kumar Singh addresses a press conference on the integration of Uber and Ola emergency response technology with city police systems to enhance passenger safety, and the launch of the 'Celebrate Responsibly' social media campaign ahead of New Year, in Bengaluru on Monday
PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

Man, sons arrested in Rs 60 lakh jewel theft in Sidlaghatta

PHOTO: SALAR

SIDLAGHATTA, 22 DEC

In a major breakthrough, Sidlaghatta police have arrested a father and his two sons in a jewellery robbery worth over Rs 60 lakh. The arrests were made following the theft from the house of Mubarak on 10 December. The complainant was entering her home in the early hours when two burqa-clad men allegedly jumped from the terrace, dragged her inside, tied her hands and legs, covered her mouth with plaster, and assaulted her, causing grievous injuries. The intruders, along with another accomplice, ransacked the house and stole gold and silver valuables worth over Rs 60 lakh. A special police team, led by Circle Inspector Anandakumar under the guidance of SP Kushal Chouskey, conducted technical and on-ground investigations. They arrested Inyath Pasha, 54, and his sons Sharuk Pasha, 25, and Sahil Pasha, 24, all residents of Filature quarters, Sidlagatta. Police recovered 451grams of gold and 819grams of silver from the accused, valued at over Rs60 lakh, and are continuing the investigation into the matter. *—Salar News*

Minor falls from 1st floor while chasing bird

KOPPAL, 22 DEC

A six-year-old boy was hospitalised after falling from the first floor of his house in Hamalara Colony, Koppal, while playing on Monday. The child, identified as Mohammed Harris, reportedly lost his balance after being distracted by a pigeon and fell from the terrace. The incident, which occurred within the Koppala City Police Station limits, was captured on a nearby CCTV camera. Harris, the son of Abbas Ali, suffered a head injury in the fall but narrowly escaped a fatal accident. His parents rushed him to KS Private Hospital, where doctors said he is stable and undergoing treatment for non-life-threatening injuries. Hospital authorities confirmed that timely medical intervention helped save the child's life despite the severity of the fall. The family said his condition remains under observation. The incident has once again highlighted the risks posed by unguarded balconies and terraces, especially for children while playing. *—PTI*

POWER TUSSLE

CM contradicts Kharge, says top brass must decide

Asserts he would abide by party's final call

MYSURU, 22 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Monday said the decision on any leadership change in the state Congress rests entirely with the party high command, asserting that he would abide by whatever it decides. He said he had already conveyed his position to the leadership, which had assured him that it would take a call.

His remarks came a day after Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said confusion over leadership existed only at the local level, not within the high command. Siddaramaiah dismissed speculation, saying the issue was being discussed largely by television channels. "There will be no Sankranti or January 15 'revolution'. The high command is supreme, and all leaders must follow its decision," he said.

The Chief Minister brushed aside political interpretations of senior leader KN Rajanna meeting Deputy CM DK Shivakumar, saying legislators meeting the Deputy CM was routine and should not be politicised. He also said he had not yet begun preparations for the next budget.

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar with Congress leader Sachin Pilot in Bengaluru on Monday
PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

On welfare schemes, he said Gruha Lakshmi assistance for February and March would be released, noting that payments had already been made for 23 months.

Meanwhile, AICC general secretary Sachin Pilot sought to play down talk of a power tussle, saying Siddaramaiah and Shivakumar were working "like brothers". Addressing reporters in Bengaluru alongside Shivakumar, Pilot said any decision taken by the high command would be acceptable to all. He asserted that the Congress government was fulfilling its promises and expressed confidence the party would return to power in 2028. *—Salar News*

Leadership issue needs to be resolved locally: Parameshwara

BENGALURU, 22 DEC

Home Minister G Parameshwara on Monday said any confusion or differences within the state Congress over the leadership issue must be resolved locally, following instructions from AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge. He said state leaders should sit together and sort out issues without involving the high command.

Parameshwara clarified that his meeting with Kharge at the latter's residence was personal, and insisted that no political matters were discussed. "If the Congress president says resolve it locally, we must follow that direction," he said.

His remarks came a day after Kharge stated that the leadership confusion existed only at the local level and not within the high command, and that state leaders should take responsibility for internal disputes. Parameshwara said CM Siddaramaiah and Deputy CM DK Shivakumar, were likely to visit Delhi on 27 December for the party Working Committee meeting, during which they may meet senior leaders. *—PTI*

BJP opposes Bill as it indulges in hate speeches: CM

MYSURU, 22 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Monday said the BJP was opposing the Karnataka Hate Speech and Hate Crimes (Prevention) Bill because it was allegedly involved in making hateful and provocative speeches. He said the legislation was introduced to maintain peace and brotherhood in society and to curb the growing menace of hate speech.

The Bill was passed by both Houses of the state legislature during the winter session in Belagavi, which concluded on December 19, amid strong opposition from the BJP and JD(S). It will now be sent to the Governor for assent to become law. The BJP has termed the Bill "draconian", a "direct attack on free speech" and a "dangerous tool for political vendetta", and has urged the Governor not to clear it.

Responding to criticism, Siddaramaiah said only those who indulge in hate and provocative speech would fear the law. "If you do not make such speeches, why would anyone file a criminal case against you?" he asked. He stressed that the legislation would apply equally to all, whether they belonged to the Congress, BJP, JD(S) or any other party.

Questioning the BJP's opposition, the Chief Minister said hate speech could not ensure social harmony. "Hate speeches have increased in recent times. To stop this and maintain peace and brotherhood, we have brought this Bill," he said, adding that the BJP's resistance suggested it was indulging in provocative rhetoric.

Under the proposed law, hate crimes would attract a jail term of one year, extendable up to seven years, along with a fine of Rs 50,000. Repeat offences could lead to imprisonment of up to seven years and a fine of Rs 1 lakh.

HINDU OUTFIT URGES GOVERNOR TO WITHHOLD ASSENT TO BILL

BENGALURU, 22 DEC

The Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, a right-wing organisation, has urged Karnataka Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot to withhold assent to the Karnataka Hate Speech and Hate Crimes (Prevention) Bill, 2025, calling it unconstitutional and a serious threat to freedom of speech and religious liberty.

In a memorandum submitted to the Governor, the Samiti and other affiliated groups warned that the Bill's provisions were vague and overbroad, and could be misused to suppress dissent. It claimed the proposed law violated Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech, as well as the right to religious freedom.

The organisation flagged what it termed excessively broad definitions of "hate speech", "hate crime" and "bias-motivated interest", arguing these could criminalise speech even without intent or imminent violence, enabling arbitrary action. It also raised concerns over a provision that shifts the burden of proof to the accused to establish "public interest" or "bona fide religious purpose", which it said runs contrary to established criminal jurisprudence.

The Samiti warned that Hindu religious activities, including references to Vedic scriptures, proselytisation discussions and criticism of religious ideologies, could be criminalised under the Bill. Objecting to speech-related offences being made cognisable and non-bailable, it said this could lead to immediate arrests, harassment of saints, journalists. *—PTI*

G RAM G threatens rural livelihoods: Priyank

BENGALURU, 22 DEC

Karnataka's Minister for Rural Development Priyank Kharge, has issued a sharp critique of the Union Government's G RAM G Act 2025. Kharge claims the new legislation, which replaces the long-standing MGNREGA, systematically undermines the core promise of rights-based rural employment, warning that the bill threatens the future of rural livelihoods.

The minister said that under the new act, the Centre would retain most decision-making powers, while states would have to bear the bulk of the financial and administrative burden. Kharge also warned that the proposed changes would erode the financial autonomy of state governments, especially as states face shrinking resources. He noted that tax devolution to states had fallen even as centrally sponsored schemes become more restrictive.

- The minister said that under the new act, the Centre would retain most decision-making powers, while states would have to bear the bulk of financial burden

Kharge alleged accused PM Modi of purposely destroying that Act to make poor villagers and farm labourers slaves to rich people. "Therefore, we (Congress) fought for the retention of the original MGNREGA," the Congress chief said. G RAM G Act 2025 is a comprehensive overhaul of India's rural employment policy that replaces the MGNREGA, increasing the statutory guarantee of wage employment from 100 to 125 days/year while shifting to a cost-sharing model between the Centre and States. *—PTI*

WINTER GEAR

A street vendor sells warm bedsheets as winter tightens its grip on the City. Bengaluru is experiencing one of its coldest winters, with a minimum temperature of 14.7°C on Monday
PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

Committee formed to review IPL match at Chinnaswamy Stadium

BENGALURU, 22 DEC

Karnataka Home Minister G Parameshwara announced that a committee has been formed to examine the proposal to host an Indian Premier League (IPL) match at Chinnaswamy Stadium. He held a meeting at Vidhana Soudha with Karnataka State Cricket Association (KSCA), who have sought permission to hold the Vijay Hazare cricket match on 24 December, without spectators. The committee, headed by the GBA Commissioner, will oversee the safety of players and officials.

A committee, comprising the Bangalore City CP, the Public Works, Fire and Emergency Services Department, and the Health Department, will visit Chinnaswamy Stadium to conduct an inspection and submit a report. Parameshwar said the government will make its next decision based on the committee's report. Chinnaswamy Stadium has not hosted major matches since a stampede outside the ground on 4 June during Royal Challengers Bengaluru's IPL victory celebrations, which claimed 11 lives. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has opted to host the Duleep Trophy and India-A series at the Centre of Excellence. The stadium was also scheduled to host five ICC Women's ODI World Cup 2025 matches. However, the games were shifted after the KSCA treasurer and secretary resigned on moral grounds following the stampede. *—ANI*

A meeting was held with State Cricket Association, who have sought permission for Vijay Hazare cricket match without spectators ***PHOTO: SALAR***

- The committee, comprising the Bangalore City Police Commissioner, and the Public Works, will visit Chinnaswamy Stadium to inspect and submit a report

IN LINE WITH SC RULING

Civic survey maps over 98K dogs in Kolar, plans shelter

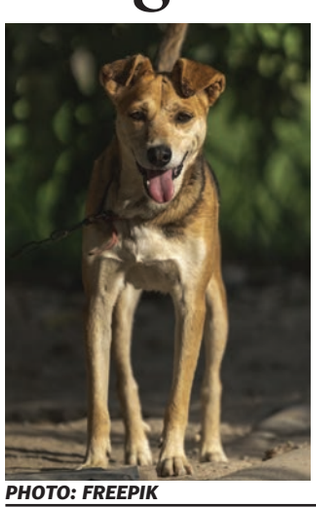


PHOTO: FREEPIK

KOLAR, 22 DEC

Authorities in State's Kolar district have identified more than 98,000 dogs, including 18,734 pet dogs, in a survey conducted by civic bodies with NGOs, Deputy Commissioner Ravi MR said.

The survey found about 75,000 dogs in rural areas and nearly 23,000 in urban pockets. Dog density was highest around hospitals, educational institutions, bus stands, temples and similar public spaces, prompting authorities to mark strategic locations for intervention.

In line with Supreme Court guidelines, civic authorities have begun creating shelters for stray dogs. In urban areas, shelters have been set up near solid waste management units located outside city limits, while rural local bodies will identify suitable sites.

Ravi said dogs will first undergo animal birth control procedures, be monitored for three days, and then shifted to shelters.

Care will follow Animal Welfare Board of India SOPs, including two meals daily, periodic vaccination and regular cleaning.

The state government has allocated funds for shelters, with costs estimated at Rs 3.35 lakh per 100 dogs. *—Salar*

Swamiji's gunfire at Kalaburagi Mutt raises alarm

KALABURAGI, 22 DEC

An incident at Hiremath of Shankaralingeshwara Mutt in Udchana village of Afzalpur taluk, Kalaburagi district, has triggered concern among residents after a religious head allegedly fired a gun in the air on the premises.

According to locals, Shanthalinga Shivacharya Swamiji discharged the firearm to create a dramatic build-up to his presence, raising questions over intent and public safety. Residents have expressed apprehension, wondering whether the act was meant to intimidate opponents or signal authority amid internal disputes at Mutt.

Villagers claim that Swamiji had been expelled from the institution several months ago following allegations of drunken behaviour and misconduct that allegedly brought disrepute to Mutt. After the expulsion, he reportedly remained out of public view for nearly eight months.

A video purportedly showing the gunfire incident has since gone viral on social media, drawing widespread criticism ***PHOTO: SALAR***

Suspicion has resurfaced following his sudden return, which coincides with ongoing discussions over the appointment of a new head of Mutt. Locals allege the gunfire episode may have been staged to assert influence or deter those opposing his reinstatement.

- According to locals, Shanthalinga Shivacharya Swamiji discharged the firearm to create a dramatic build-up to his presence, raising questions over intent and public safety

A video purportedly showing the incident has since gone viral on social media, drawing widespread criticism. Many users have condemned the public display of a weapon by a religious figure and demanded strict action. Authorities have not yet confirmed whether a formal complaint has been registered. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: PTI

Lavasa project: Bombay HC drops Sharad Pawar's PIL

MUMBAI, 22 DEC

The Bombay High Court on Monday dismissed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) seeking a CBI probe against NCP (SP) leader Sharad Pawar, his daughter and Baramati MP Supriya Sule as well as his nephew and Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar, for alleged illegal permissions given to the Lavasa hill station project in Pune. A bench of Chief Justice Shree Chandrashekhar and Justice Gautam Ankhad noted that petitioner Nanasaheb Jadhav, a lawyer, failed to show any legal provision whereby a court can pass a direction to the police to register a case. After HC had refused to interfere Jadhav petition on the same in 2022, the latter filed a fresh PIL in 2023 seeking a CBI probe. *—PTI*

Manipur will take time to resolve disputes: RSS Chief

KOLKATA, 22 DEC

RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat said it would take time to resolve differences among warring sides in ethnic strife-torn Manipur, exuding confidence that peace will prevail in the northeastern state. Bhagwat, who recently visited Manipur, said he had held talks with all tribal and social leaders as well as youth representatives of the state. Speaking at a centenary celebration of Sangh on Sunday, Bhagwat stated "But bridging the minds is a great task, and it will take time." "We could do it in Arunachal, Meghalaya, we are doing it in Nagaland and other places," he said. Bhagwat said that the RSS has around 100 shakhas in Manipur. Maintaining that peace will ultimately prevail in Manipur, he said, "But definitely it will take time." *—PTI*

Modi distorted history during Assam visit: Gogoi

GUWAHATI, 22 DEC

Assam Congress president Gaurav Gogoi on Monday alleged Prime Minister Narendra Modi presented a distorted version of Indian history during his visit to the state. He said it was deeply unfortunate that the "PM did not pay any tribute" to singer Zubeen Garg, unlike the Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi. "Prime Minister Modi was in Assam for two days, and addressed the people of the state on several occasions. As expected the speeches focused on attacking the Congress party and presenting a distorted version of Indian history," alleged Gogoi. *—PTI*

National Herald case: HC seeks Gandhis' reply

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

The Delhi High Court on Monday issued notices to Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, and others, seeking their response to the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) plea challenging a trial court order that refused to take cognisance of its chargesheet in the National Herald case. Justice Ravinder Dudeja listed the matter for further hearing on 12 March, 2026. Notices were also issued to Suman Dubey, Sam Pitroda, Young Indian, Dotex Merchandise Pvt Ltd, and Sunil Bhandari. The trial court had held on 16 December that the ED's complaint was "impermissible in law" as it was not based on an FIR, noting that prosecution under the PMLA requires an FIR or complaint by an authorised agency. Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, representing the ED, said the court erred, while senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, representing the Gandhis, said he would reply after accepting notice. *—PTI*

CPI(M) blames RSS for Kerala lynching

Kerala CM assures justice after Ram Narayan was mistaken to be a thief & beaten to death

T'PURAM, 22 DEC

The Kerala government on Monday assured stringent action in the mob lynching of a Chhattisgarh native mistaken to be a thief, and promised justice to the family, even as the ruling CPI(M) targeted the RSS over the assault, a charge denied by the BJP.

Ram Narayan, 31, was allegedly beaten to death on Wednesday after being accused of involvement in theft at Kizhakeattappallam near Walayar in Palakkad district. With the issue sending shock waves across the state, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Monday described the incident as "deeply disturbing". Assuring justice to his family, who have arrived in the state, Vijayan said such acts tarnish the reputation of a progressive society like Kerala and are completely unacceptable.

State minister MB Rajesh claimed racial slurs were made at the victim and that the attackers were RSS workers. Ruling CPI(M) state Secretary MV Govindan also alleged that RSS-BJP workers were behind the crime.

In a statement issued by the CM's office, Vijayan said strict action would be taken against those responsible for the crime. A special investigation team of the district police is probing the incident, he said, adding that instructions have been issued to thoroughly examine the details of the case and initiate all necessary legal proceedings.

Pinarayi Vijayan; Ram Narayan

PHOTO: PTI/SCREENGRAB

> **I have conducted more than 10,000 post-mortem examinations, but I have never seen a body subjected to such severe violence**
>
> -Hithesh Shankar, Thrissur Government Medical College Hospital Doctor

The government will also review the matter and ensure appropriate compensation to the victim's family, Vijayan added. He called for collective vigilance to prevent the recurrence of such incidents in the future.

His remarks came a day after opposition Congress and the victim's family demanded compensation and an investigation under stringent laws, including the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

The brother of deceased man told reporters on Sunday that the family would not accept the body until their demands, including compensation of Rs 25 lakh, are met.

Narayan, who reached Kerala in search of a job, became a victim of the "divisive politics" of Sangh Parivar, Rajesh alleged. Five people have been arrested so far for allegedly beating him to death on suspicion of theft. *—PTI*

Around 400 members of the TMC-leaning BLO Adhikar Raksha Committee gather outside the Chief Electoral Officer's office to protest against the workload on booth-level officers in Kolkata, on Monday PHOTO: PTI

Gross errors in WB SIR exercise: Mamata fumes

KOLKATA, 22 DEC

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee lashed out at the Election Commission on Monday, alleging that there were "gross errors" in the draft rolls published after enumeration.

Addressing TMC's Booth Level Agents (BLAs) at the Netaji Indoor Stadium here, she also dubbed it as an exercise "riddled with blunders from A to Z."

Banerjee alleged that the EC was appointing observers without informing the state government, and trying to promote the BJP's interests.

Alleging that thousands of "legitimate voters" have found their names deleted from the draft rolls, Banerjee said, "We don't know how the problems of so many genuine electors can be solved in so little time."

In the draft electoral rolls published after the enumeration phase, 58,20,899 names have been excluded, reducing the electorate to 7.08 crore in West Bengal.

Around 1.36 crore entries have also been flagged for "logical discrepancies," while 30 lakh voters were categorised as unmapped, a significant percentage of whom are likely to be called for verification hearings in the next 45 days.

She also said that Central officers who have been appointed micro observers for SIR hearings have little knowledge of Bengali.

A microphone failure briefly stalled Mamata Banerjee's address at the meeting, drawing an angry reaction from the CM, who suspected "sabotage" and warned of action.

Meanwhile, the Leader of the Opposition in the West Bengal Assembly, Suvendu Adhikari, claimed that Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's meeting with Trinamool Congress booth-level agents (BLAs) indicated that she was "unsettled" by SIR. *—PTI*

POST BABRI MOSQUE ROW

Ex-MLA Humayun floats new party

BELDANGA, 22 DEC

West Bengal MLA Humayun Kabir on Monday launched a new political outfit, Janata Unnayan Party, days after his suspension from the Trinamool Congress for laying the foundation stone for a Babri-style mosque in Murshidabad district.

Addressing a public meeting in Beladanga, Kabir announced eight candidates his party plans to field in the 2026 West Bengal Assembly elections. The Bharatpur MLA said he would contest from two constituencies, Rejinagar and Beldanga, adding that the final number of seats would be decided later.

Declaring his objective, Kabir said his mission was to unseat Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, alleging she was no longer accessible to ordinary people. "Mamata Banerjee is no longer the same person I knew. She is beyond the reach of the common man," he told supporters.

BJP dismissed Kabir's move, alleging he was acting to indirectly benefit the TMC. State BJP President Samik Bhattacharya claimed Kabir would not emerge as a significant factor in the upcoming polls and accused him of attempting to split BJP votes. He also linked the political situation to regional security concerns, asserting that voters would back the BJP.

The TMC has not commented on Kabir's new party. The ruling party suspended him on 4 December after his announcement to build a Babri-style mosque sparked controversy.

On 6 December, the anniversary of the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid, Kabir went ahead and laid the foundation stone at Rejinagar. *—PTI*

Humayun Kabir during a public meeting after he floated a new outfit, Janata Unnayan Party, in Murshidabad, West Bengal PHOTO: PTI

Udhayanidhi calls AIADMK 'Amit Shah DMK'

CHENNAI, 22 DEC

Tamil Nadu Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin accused the BJP-led Centre of using the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls as a "shortcut" to delete votes favouring the DMK, and mocked the AIADMK, calling it the "Amit Shah Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam".

Addressing a programme on 21 December, Udhayanidhi alleged the SIR exercise was designed to remove votes of minorities, women and marginalised sections who increasingly support the DMK.

"Around 97 lakh votes have been struck off across Tamil Nadu, including about 14 lakh in Chennai," he claimed, adding that Chief Minister MK Stalin was the first to flag its impact.

Reiterating opposition to the New Education Policy, he accused the Centre of attempting to impose Hindi on Tamil Nadu.

He said the state would not accept the policy even if it brought a Rs 10,000-crore Union payout.

Taking a swipe at AIADMK leader Edappadi K Palaniswami, Udhayanidhi alleged he had "completely surrendered" to Union Home Minister Amit Shah. "The AIADMK has become Amit Shah Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam," he said, questioning claims that the party would protect minorities.

Appealing to voters, Udhayanidhi said voting was a right and urged people to verify their names in electoral rolls. He said DMK booth-level agents would assist citizens in filing forms, noting 18 January as the deadline. *—PTI*

Nitish, Samrat Choudhary meet Modi & Shah

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar made his first visit to the national capital since retaining his position last month, following the NDA's significant victory in the recent assembly elections. During his trip, he met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah, accompanied by Bihar's Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary and Union Minister Rajiv Ranjan Singh.

The meetings, which took place separately, covered various development and political issues pertinent to Bihar. Before his meeting with Modi, Kumar, Choudhary, and Singh visited Shah at his residence, who emphasised the NDA government's commitment to enhancing public welfare in Bihar. The meetings also addressed the expansion of the state cabinet and the upcoming elections for five Rajya Sabha seats. *—PTI*

Union Minister Rajiv Ranjan Singh, Bihar CM Nitish Kumar, PM Narendra Modi, and Bihar DyCM Samrat Choudhary in New Delhi PHOTO: PTI

Muslim League office attacked in Kerala

MALAPPURAM, 22 DEC

- CPI(M) leaders countered the allegations, saying UDF workers first attacked their party office

Police on Monday booked 14 CPI(M) workers in connection with an alleged attack on an Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) office in Perinthalmanna following a United Democratic Front victory parade after local body elections.

According to the FIR, UDF supporters held a victory celebration on Sunday evening. Around 8.30pm, the accused allegedly gathered outside the Muslim League office and pelted stones and used sticks, damaging the building and its flagpost. The incident prompted UDF activists to assemble at the spot, creating tension before police intervened and dispersed both groups.

By 11pm, the UDF announced a hartal at Perinthalmanna to protest the attack, but withdrew it on Monday morning citing inconvenience to the public due to short notice. CPI(M) leaders countered the allegations, claiming UDF workers first attacked their party office during celebrations.

Police said a probe into the alleged attack on the CPI(M) office would begin after a formal complaint. Protest marches were reported across Perinthalmanna on Monday.

Leader of the Opposition VD Satheesan accused the CPI(M) of resorting to violence after electoral setbacks, warning of backlash. *—PTI*

RUCKUS IN UP ASSEMBLY

No deaths due to codeine syrup: Yogi

LUCKNOW, 22 DEC

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Monday strongly rebutted allegations by Leader of the Opposition Mata Prasad Pandey over "deaths" due to consumption of fake medicines and codeine syrup, asserting in the Assembly that no such case has come to the notice of the state government so far.

He said that cases related to illegal diversion of the syrup were being pursued under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act and the state government had successfully defended its stand in court.

Replying to the issue raised by the opposition as soon as the House proceedings began, Adityanath said the matter appeared to be politically motivated.

He said "there is not a single case of death due to fake drugs reported in Uttar Pradesh till date," and added that enforcement agencies remain vigilant.

Meanwhile, launching a sharp attack on the SP, Adityanath alleged that the largest wholesaler involved in the codeine syrup case, first arrested by the special task force (STF) in 2016, was issued a license when the SP was in power.

He clarified that codeine syrup is not manufactured in Uttar Pradesh, and the state only has stockists and wholesalers. Production takes place in states like Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

The death cases that came to light were reported from other states and were linked to a syrup manufactured in Tamil Nadu, he said.

Detailing the action taken so far, Adityanath said the government had registered 79 cases, named 225 people and arrested 78 accused. Raids have been conducted at 134 firms. *—PTI*

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath speaks during the Winter session of the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, in Lucknow PHOTO: PTI

> **There are two namoone in the country, one in Delhi and the other in Lucknow. Whenever there's a discussion in the country, these individuals run away.**
>
> -Yogi Adityanath, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister

> **Self-admission! No one had expected that the Delhi-Lucknow fight would reach this point. People holding constitutional positions should maintain at least some sense of propriety and not cross the limits of decorum**
>
> -Akhilesh Yadav, Samajwadi Party President

Protests erupt as Madurai dargah raises festival flag

MADURAI, 22 DEC

The annual festival of a dargah atop the Thirupparankundram hill here commenced amidst protests by a section of Hindu devotees who questioned the local official for granting permission to the dargah despite the high court verdict in the Karthigai Deepam lamp lighting case.

Following permission from the Thirumangalam Revenue Divisional Officer, the flag was hoisted on 21 December night at Hazrat Sultan Sikandar Badushah Auliya Dargah in connection with the "Santhanakoodu" festival on 6 January, 2026.

BJP functionaries staged a 'road roko' agitation on Sunday night seeking to know how permission could be granted to one community while the Madras High Court order on lighting the Karthigai Deepam atop a stone pillar near the dargah was not carried out.

A few devotees had moved the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court seeking contempt proceedings against the lwocal authorities for not implementing the 1 December order of a single judge permitting the lighting of the lamp on the Deepathoon near the Sikandar Badushah Auliya Dargah.

Meanwhile, the police on Monday permitted the Hindu devotees to visit the Kasi Viswanathar temple atop the Thirupparankundram. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Delhi cops bust unit making wrappers for spurious drugs

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Delhi Police busted a printing unit allegedly involved in supplying packaging material for spurious medicines and fake cosmetics, an official said on Monday, adding that two suspects have been arrested. The police said the three suspects, Shree Ram, Gaurav Bhagat and Parmod Kumar Gupta, were earlier also arrested for manufacturing spurious drugs. During the investigation, the involvement of a press supplying packaging material for fake drugs and cosmetics came to light, and two more were arrested, DCP Aditya Gautam said. The raid conducted at the printing press led to the recovery of two dye frames used for printing wrapper boxes of an ointment, he added. The two arrested are Anil Singh Rawat, 46, Burari, and Rahul Agarwal, 31, Delhi. *—PTI*

UP police launch crime reporting WhatsApp bot

LUCKNOW/VARANASI, 22 DEC

Residents of Jaunpur, Ghazipur and Chandauli can now anonymously report crimes through a WhatsApp chatbot launched by the Varanasi police range, officials said on Monday. The initiative, 'Police Satark Mitra', allows citizens to share information on offences without disclosing identity. Deputy Inspector General Vaibhav Krishna said a simple "Hi" activates the bot, which guides users to submit details via text, audio, photos or videos. Offences include cattle smuggling, illicit liquor and drugs, arms trafficking, gambling, prostitution, crimes against women and children, illegal mining, extortion and police corruption. Information is routed to the district SP and DIG offices for action, with updates sent. *—PTI*

Man, minor son stabbed to death in Bihar's Madhubani

MADHUBANI, 22 DEC

A 50-year-old man and his minor son were allegedly stabbed to death in Laheriya Ganj area of Bihar's Madhubani district, police said on Monday. The deceased were identified as Lal Babu Sada, 50, and his 15-year-old son Deepak Sada. SP Yogendra Kumar said the incident occurred on Sunday evening when the accused allegedly attacked the duo outside their residence. The injured were taken to a government hospital, where they succumbed to injuries on Monday morning, Kumar said. Preliminary probe suggests a dispute related to a money transaction may have led to the incident. "Some family members of the accused are being questioned," Kumar added. *—PTI*

Maoist arms manufacturing unit busted in Sukma

SUKMA, 22 DEC

Security forces destroyed a Maoist weapons manufacturing facility in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district and seized arms and explosives, police said on Monday. Acting on intelligence inputs, a joint team of the CRPF's 150th battalion and local police busted the illegal unit in forested hills near Meenagatta village on Sunday, Superintendent of Police Kiran Chavan said. The team recovered eight single-shot rifles, cartridges, detonators, Cordex wire, PEK and ANFO explosives, ammonium nitrate, wireless sets, a welding machine, Maoist uniforms and literature. Initial investigation suggested the unit was used to scale up armed activities. Chavan said since January 2024, a total of 599 Maoists surrendered, 460 were arrested and 71 neutralised in Sukma. Operations will continue. *—PTI*

U'khand sitting like mute spectator: SC on land grab

Chief secy directed to form inquiry committee, submit report

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

The apex court clarified that the directions were necessary to prevent irreversible damage to forest areas and to preserve public land until the inquiry is completed *PHOTO: AI PIC*

The Supreme Court on Monday sharply criticised the Uttarakhand government over the alleged grabbing of forest land, observing that the State and its authorities were sitting like "mute spectators", and initiated a suo motu case to address the issue.

A vacation bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi directed the Uttarakhand chief secretary to constitute a fact-finding committee and submit a report to the court.

"What is shocking to us is that the State of Uttarakhand and its authorities are sitting like mute spectators when forest land is being grabbed in front of their eyes. Thus, we initiate a suo motu case," the bench said.

The court further instructed the chief secretary and the principal chief conservator of forests to ensure that no third-party rights are created on the disputed land and that no construction activity is carried out during the pendency of the proceedings.

It also ordered that all vacant forest land, except areas with existing residential houses, be taken into possession by the forest department with immediate effect.

The apex court clarified that the directions were necessary to prevent irreversible damage to forest areas and to preserve public land until the inquiry is completed.

The matter has been posted for hearing on Monday after the court reopens following its vacation.

The proceedings stem from a plea filed by Anita Kandwal, who alleged illegal occupation of a large stretch of forest land in Uttarakhand. The observations highlight judicial concern over environmental protection and state accountability nationwide. *—PTI*

SC stays conviction of Manikrao Kokate

New Delhi, 22 Dec

The Supreme Court on Monday stayed the conviction of former Maharashtra minister Manikrao Kokate in a cheating and forgery case, issuing notice to the state government on his plea. A vacation bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi said the stay would avert his disqualification as an MLA, but barred him from holding any office of profit. Kokate's two-year sentence, upheld by a Nashik sessions court last week, stemmed from fraudulent allotment of flats to them jointly. *—PTI*

Strict GRAP-IV measures, including the "No PUC, No Fuel" rule and a ban on non-BS VI vehicles, have been enforced *PHOTO: PTI*

No respite from toxic air for Delhi

- The Air Quality Early Warning System predicted that the AQI will remain in the 'very poor' category over the next six days

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Delhi has seen an unprecedented spike in pollution this December, with no days registering 'moderate' air quality and nearly 20 days in the red zone, according to Central Pollution Control Board data. On Monday, the city recorded a 24-hour average AQI of 373. The Air Quality Early Warning System predicts levels will remain 'very poor' over the next six days.

Strict GRAP-IV measures, including the "No PUC, No Fuel" rule and a ban on non-BS VI vehicles, have been enforced. Over 2.12 lakh new Pollution Under Control certificates were issued in the past four days, though around 10,000 vehicles failed emissions tests. Delhi Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa warned of stringent action against polluting industries and offices violating work-from-home directives.

Markets have reported 30–40% declines in footfall, with traders attributing slower sales to restricted NCR movement. NDMC has fined 22 construction sites Rs 11 lakh for dust-mitigation violations this year.

Medical stores have recorded rising sales of eye drops, nasal sprays, masks, and nebulisers due to pollution-induced eye irritation, and respiratory issues.

Chemists note higher demand compared to last winter, especially among children and elderly. *—PTI*

Rijiju offers chadar at Ajmer Sharif Dargah on behalf of PMO

JAIPUR/NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Union Minister Kiren Rijiju during a visit to offer a 'chadar' at Ajmar Sharif Dargah during Urs, in Rajasthan *PHOTO: PTI*

Union Minister for Minority Affairs Kiren Rijiju on Monday offered a chadar at the Ajmer Sharif Dargah on behalf of the Central government during the ongoing Urs celebrations, praying for peace, harmony and national progress.

"I have come to the dargah during the Urs. While presenting the chadar, I prayed for peace and prosperity on behalf of the Government of India and the delegation present here," Rijiju told reporters in Ajmer.

The ceremony was attended by members of the Dargah Committee, khadims and government officials, continuing a long-standing practice of official representation at the annual Urs.

Meanwhile, a plea has been filed in the Supreme Court seeking directions to restrain Prime Minister Narendra Modi from offering a ceremonial chadar at the Ajmer Sharif Dargah. The matter was mentioned before a vacation bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi.

"No listing today," the bench said, asking counsel for the petitioners to approach the Registry.

The petition, filed by Jitender Singh and others, contends that the practice of a Prime Minister offering a chadar, initiated in 1947 and followed since, has "no legal or constitutional basis". It further claims that historical accounts link Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti to foreign invasions and actions allegedly inconsistent with India's sovereignty and civilisational ethos. *—PTI*

TRAFFIC DISRUPTED

100+ farmer activists booked for protest in UP

MUZAFFARNAGAR, 22 DEC

Police have booked over 100 activists of a farmers' outfit, including a district-level leader, for allegedly disrupting traffic and damaging public property during a protest at the Jagahedi toll plaza in Muzaffarnagar district, officials said Monday.

Circle Officer Neeraj Singh said a case was filed at Titawi police station against more than 100 people, with 20 named accused, including farmers' outfit district president Nikhil Choudhry, for the incident on Sunday. The accused were booked under provisions of the BNS and the Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act. Police said hundreds of activists assembled at the toll plaza and staged a sit-in, alleging misbehaviour by toll employees with farmers. Protesters submitted a 13-point memorandum to the administration, seeking action on grievances. *—PTI*

Circle Officer Neeraj Singh said a case was filed against more than 100 people, with 20 named accused *PHOTO: SCREENGRAB*

Cops likely to shut Malayalam actor's drug case

KOCHI, 22 DEC

Police are likely to close a drug case against Malayalam actor Shine Tom Chacko after a chemical analysis report found no traces of narcotic substances, officials said on Monday.

The case was registered in April after the District Anti-Narcotic Special Action Force raided a hotel following a tip-off.

Police alleged Chacko fled on seeing officers and detained Ahmmed Murshad, booking a case under the NDPS Act. Chacko later appeared before police and provided blood and hair samples.

"The chemical analysis report stated no traces of drugs. Hence, it would be difficult to proceed," an Ernakulam North police officer told PTI. Police said failure to establish consumption weakens conspiracy charges, and legal opinion is being sought on filing a closure report. *—PTI*

MAN GETS 10 YEARS OF RI FOR POSING AS POLICE, RAPING WOMAN

THANE, 22 DEC

A Navi Mumbai court sentenced a 44-year-old security guard to 10 years' imprisonment for impersonating a police officer and raping a woman in 2016.

Judge Parag A Sane convicted Sagar Baburao Dhulap under IPC Sections 376, 170 and 384, awarding 10 years for rape, two for impersonation and three for extortion, to run concurrently, with a Rs 1,500 fine.

The prosecution said the offence occurred on February 13, 2016, when the survivor and a friend visited a lodge in Kurla, Mumbai.

Dhulap intercepted them, posed as a police officer, threatened to inform her parents, extorted Rs 30,000, and forcibly took the 22-year-old to a lodge in Turbhe, where she was raped.

Rejecting the consent claim, the court said silence in public does not negate testimony. The defence plea of consent was rejected. *—PTI*

UP woman missing for a month found dead in field, 'lover' held

KUSHINAGAR, 22 DEC

A woman missing for nearly a month was found dead in a sugarcane field in Uttar Pradesh's Kushinagar district, with police arresting her alleged lover for murder.

The decomposed body of the 40-year-old, a resident of the Nebua Naurangia area, was recovered on Sunday, 26 days after she was reported missing. Police said she had gone to the fields on 26 November but did not return. Her son informed police on 29 November after an unsuccessful search, leading to a missing person report.

During investigation, suspicion fell on Basant, a distant relative from Piprahiya in the Ramkola area, who was absconding with his phone switched off. He was traced and arrested late Saturday.

Police said the accused initially denied involvement but later confessed. He claimed he was in an illicit relationship with the woman and strangled her after calling her to meet him on the village outskirts, before dumping the body in a nearby sugarcane field. Forensic teams recovered skeletal remains and evidence from the site. Station House Officer Deepak Kumar Singh said post-mortem, DNA tests will confirm identity. *—PTI*

CRUISE TO VOLCANO

Ring in New Year near India's active volcano

The cruise will depart from Haddo Wharf in Sri Vijaya Puram at 9pm on 31 December and return at 2pm on 1 January *PHOTO: FREEPIK*

SRI VIJAYA PURAM, 22 DEC

People can ring in the New Year with a rare view of India's only active volcano, as the Andaman and Nicobar administration has planned a special New Year's Eve cruise to Barren Island.

The cruise will depart from Haddo Wharf in Sri Vijaya Puram at 9pm on 31 December and return at 2pm on 1 January, offering passengers a close view of the volcanic island. Officials said the voyage blends adventure, celebration and natural spectacle.

The journey will be operated onboard MV Swaraj Dweep, which will host music and onboard activities to mark the New Year. Catering services will be available throughout the voyage.

"This sea voyage will ensure a rare close-up view of Barren Island and an unforgettable countdown to the New Year under the stars. With a capacity of 1,200 passengers, the cruise has already received an overwhelming public response," an official said.

Passengers can choose from multiple travel classes depending on comfort and budget. Ticket prices start at Rs 3,180 per person and go up to Rs 8,310.

The Directorate of Shipping Services will operate the cruise, and bookings can be made through its website.

Located about 140km by sea from Sri Vijaya Puram, formerly Port Blair, Barren Island lies at the junction of the Indian and Burmese tectonic plates. The uninhabited island spans 8.34sqkm. *—PTI*

Tigress airlifted from MP's Pench to Rajasthan

BUNDI, 22 DEC

Three-year old tigress, PN-224, being tranquilised *PHOTO: PTI*

A three-year-old tigress, PN-224, from Madhya Pradesh's Pench Tiger Reserve has been successfully airlifted to Rajasthan in a significant conservation effort aimed at boosting the genetic diversity of the state's tiger population.

The operation took place on Sunday, with the tigress being tranquillised by forest teams before her capture at the Sukatra airstrip, where she was loaded into a cage for transport.

Using an IAF MI-17 helicopter, the tigress was flown to Jaipur before being transported by road to the Ramgarh Vishdhari Tiger Reserve in Bundi district. The relocation involved meticulous planning over several weeks.

"Pench tigress PN-224 was captured from the wild and airlifted... This relocation will not only increase the tiger population but also strengthen genetic diversity among different tiger landscapes," said Rajneesh Singh, deputy director of Pench Tiger Reserve. *—PTI*

SANTAS CELEBRATE

People dressed in Santa Claus costumes take part in a morning run in Madrid, Spain, during the annual Santa race through the streets of the Spanish capital. ***PHOTO: PTI***

US-India tension has silenced Quad partnership

When leaders of "the Quad" last met in September 2024, host and then-US president Joe Biden declared the partnership between the US, India, Australia and Japan to be "more strategically aligned than ever before".

"The Quad is here to stay," trumpeted Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Fast-forward a little over a year, and the tune has changed.

Leaders of the Quad were due to hold their latest summit in November 2025, with India hosting. But the month came and went, and no event was held. A future date has yet to be announced.

Why the silence? Experts of international institutions and the geopolitics and geoeconomics of the Indo-Pacific, believe the answers can be found in the calculus of the two largest members involved: India and the US.

For the Trump administration, the domestic dividends of the Quad are not immediately obvious. Meanwhile, New Delhi is more concerned about how to position itself amid the great power competition between China and the US.

The result is paralysis for the Quad, for now.

"The Quad" diplomatic partnership between the US, India, Australia and Japan, is stuck in paralysis despite strong start in 2004 ***PHOTO: PTI***

THE EVOLUTION OF THE QUAD

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, to give the Quad its full name, began life in 2004.

The Quad 1.0 focused on humanitarian disaster assistance and cooperation after the Indian Ocean tsunami. In 2007, under the vision of then-Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, the Quad was recast as a platform to promote a free and prosperous Indo-Pacific, with an eye toward maritime security and economic cooperation.

Since then, the Quad has seen many fits and starts. The Quad 2.0 came to life in 2017 as the four core members coalesced around a shared sentiment of countering China's rising power.

Despite its name, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue has gravitated toward non-security agendas, from global health to maritime domain awareness and critical technologies.

Yet even as this emerging Quad 3.0 has foregrounded cooperation around the slogan "development, stability and prosperity," it is over trade and tariffs that the two largest members of the Quad are not seeing eye to eye.

EAGLE AND ELEPHANT TUSSLE OVER TARIFFS

On 1 Aug, Washington imposed a 25 per cent reciprocal tariff on Indian goods over long-standing trade frictions, notably over access to India's agricultural market. Followed by an additional 25 per cent punitive duty for New Delhi's continued purchases of Russian oil.

The combined 50 per cent US tariff was accompanied by another move that upset New Delhi: new US restrictions on H-1B visas.

The rift between New Delhi and Washington widened with India's decision to attend a meeting in Rio de Janeiro in September of the so-called BRICS nations. That was interpreted as an "anti-US" summit by Washington.

As a key member of the BRICS grouping, India's attendance should have come as no surprise. Despite Modi's decision not to attend personally, the US took umbrage, with US Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick criticising India's BRICS membership, accusing New Delhi of having "rubbed the US the wrong way".

Despite recent tensions, factors underpinning US-India relations remain constant. The US is India's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching USD131.84 billion in the 2024-25 fiscal year.

COUNTERING 'DRAGON-ELEPHANT' TANGO?

Yet at the same time, India appears to be tilting toward China, economically and in geopolitics. Modi visited China during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit meeting in August and framed the two countries as development partners, not rivals. Earlier this year, Chinese leader Xi Jinping used the term "Dragon-Elephant Tango" to promote a vision of India-China ties based on "mutual achievement."

BROADER SOURCES OF INDIAN-US TENSION

It isn't just the warming China-India relationship that has thrown a wrench into the Quad's works. The Trump administration's growing embrace of India's archrival Pakistan has also soured US-India ties.

Trump's claim to have mediated an end to the brief Pakistan-India war in May and his subsequent invitation of Pakistan's army chief to the White House were met with anger in India.

That dispute was mirrored by the one over Russian oil, which had precipitated some of Trump's tariffs on India. Modi's government has walked a tightrope between the US and Russia, wanting to keep open the possibility of good relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, while managing tensions with the US That's why Putin's visit to India in December held such symbolic value.

OPTIMISM AMID PARALYSIS

So, how does all this diplomatic tangoing affect the Quad?

The result, it appears, is paralysis at this juncture. But it is important to point out that neither country wants to pronounce the Quad dead.

And both nations continue to reaffirm their commitment to the partnership – betting that political conditions will stabilize and that global trends may turn in their favor.

So, there are still reasons for guarded optimism. Recent progress in trade negotiations and gradual reductions in Russian oil imports could ease Washington's skepticism over India. For their part, Japan and Australia are trying to keep the momentum going – Japan with its naval and coast guard capabilities and Australia with infrastructure and health initiatives.

If a mutually acceptable trade deal with the US can emerge, and New Delhi can craft an agenda for the Quad framework that is acceptable to the current US administration, a leaders summit could still materialize in 2026.

But the louder the tariff wars between India and the US become, the slimmer the chance for a stronger Quadrilateralin the near term. *—The Conversation*

SALAR سالار

'Humidity could increase stunting in S Asian children'

Hot and humid conditions driven by climate change could increase cases of stunting in South Asia's children by over three million by 2050, a study has estimated.

Researchers at the US' University of California Santa Barbara looked at how exposure to extremely hot, humid conditions during pregnancy can impact children's health in the populous continent.

'Height-for-age' -- a commonly-used indicator of chronic health status for children aged under five -- was analysed. It is the ratio of a one's height to what is average for their age.

Pregnant women are known to be especially susceptible to heat stress due to the added weight and hormonal changes, which makes them vulnerable to overheating.

The findings published in the journal Science show that humidity can worsen impacts of exposure to heat, in part because it prevents pregnant women from cooling down.

The worst times were found to be very early and very late in pregnancy.

"At the beginning of pregnancy, the fetus is very vulnerable, while at the end of pregnancy, the mother is more vulnerable," lead author Katie McMahon, a doctoral student, said.

Looking at exposure during the third trimester revealed that health outcomes due to heat and humidity were about four times worse than those from heat alone, explained Kathy Baylis, a professor in the department of geography at the University of California Santa Barbara.

Wet-bulb globe temperature accounts for three additional factors beyond air temperature that influence heat stress: humidity, radiant heat, and airflow.

PHOTO: FREEPIK

The researchers also found that each additional day with a maximum wet-bulb globe temperature exceeding 29 degrees Celsius was associated with a reduced number of live births six to 12 months later.

However, each extra day with a maximum temperature of more than 35 degrees Celsius was found to be associated with an increased birth rates up to three months of exposure.

The results are in line with those from previous studies linking heat exposure with premature births -- hotter temperatures are shifting births earlier, while hot-humid conditions could be bringing down overall conception rates, increasing rates of early-stage pregnancy loss, or both, the researchers said.

"Exposure to hot, humid conditions in-utero is dangerous for child health, and more dangerous than just hot temperatures alone," McMahon said.

Hot and humid conditions are projected to increase under continued global warming, with South Asia expected to be among the world's worst hit regions -- the most densely populated places on the planet, the researchers said.

"We find that hot-humid exposures are much more detrimental to health than hot temperatures alone, with the potential to increase stunting in South Asia by over three million children by 2050," they wrote.

Therefore, by focussing on effects of temperature alone, researchers, doctors and public health officials may be underestimating the true impacts of extreme weather, the team said.

Child health data was taken from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), a large-scale and comprehensive household survey of public health and demographics. Daily weather data was produced by the Climate Hazards Center at the University of California Santa Barbara. *—PTI*

Extreme heat and humidity during pregnancy can worsen health outcomes for mothers and babies, with South Asia among the regions most at risk under global warming ***PHOTO: PTI***

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Here's how Russia could attack Elon Musk's conquering of space

STARLINK IN CROSSHAIRS

NATO intelligence services suspect Russia may be developing a "zone-effect" weapon capable of disabling multiple satellites by flooding Starlink orbits with debris ***PHOTO: STARLINK***

Two NATO-nation intelligence services suspect Russia is developing a new anti-satellite weapon to target Elon Musk's Starlink constellation with destructive orbiting clouds of shrapnel, with the aim of reining in Western space superiority that has helped Ukraine on the battlefield.

Intelligence findings seen by The Associated Press say the so-called "zone-effect" weapon would seek to flood Starlink orbits with hundreds of thousands of high-density pellets, potentially disabling multiple satellites at once but also risking catastrophic collateral damage to other orbiting systems.

Analysts who haven't seen the findings say they doubt such a weapon could work without causing uncontrollable chaos in space for companies and countries, including Russia and its ally China, that rely on thousands of orbiting satellites for communications, defense and other vital needs.

Such repercussions, including risks to its own space systems, could steer Moscow away from deploying or using such a weapon, analysts said.

"I don't buy it. Like, I really don't," said Victoria Samson, a space-security specialist at the Secure World Foundation who leads the Colorado-based nongovernmental organization's annual study of anti-satellite systems.

But the commander of the Canadian military's Space Division, Brig Gen Christopher Horner, said such Russian work cannot be ruled out in light of previous US allegations that Russia also has been pursuing an indiscriminate nuclear, space-based weapon.

"I can't say I've been briefed on that type of system. But it's not implausible," he said. "If the reporting on the nuclear weapons system is accurate and that they're willing to develop that and willing to go to that end, well it wouldn't strike me as shocking that something just short of that, but equally damaging, is within their wheelhouse of development."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov did not respond to messages from the AP seeking comment. Russia has previously called for United Nations efforts to stop the orbital deployment of weapons and President Vladimir Putin has said Moscow has no intention of deploying nuclear space weapons.

Weapon would have multiple targets

The intelligence findings were shown to the AP on condition that the services involved were not identified and the news organisation was not able to independently verify the findings' conclusions.

The US Space Force didn't respond to e-mailed questions. The French military's Space Command said in a statement to the AP that it could not comment on the findings but said, "We can inform you that Russia has, in recent years, been multiplying irresponsible, dangerous, and even hostile actions in space."

Russia views Starlink in particular as a grave threat, the findings indicate. The thousands of low-orbiting satellites have been pivotal for Ukraine's survival against Russia's full-scale invasion, now in its fourth year.

Starlink's high-speed internet service is used by Ukrainian forces for battlefield communications, weapons targeting and other roles and by civilians and government officials where Russian strikes have affected communications.

Russian officials repeatedly have warned that commercial satellites serving Ukraine's military could be legitimate targets. This month, Russia said it has fielded a new ground-based missile system, the S-500, which is capable of hitting low-orbit targets.

Unlike a missile that Russia tested in 2021 to destroy a defunct Cold War-era satellite, the new weapon in development would target multiple Starlinks at once.

System is possibly just experimental

The findings seen by the AP didn't say when Russia might be capable of deploying such a system nor detail whether it has been tested or how far along research is believed to be.

The system is in active development and information about the timing of an expected deployment is too sensitive to share, according to an official familiar with the findings and other related intelligence that the AP did not see. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the nonpublic findings.

Such Russian research could be simply experimental, Samson said."Often times people pushing these ideas are doing it because they want the US side to build something like that or... to justify increased spending on counter-space capabilities or using it for a more hawkish approach on Russia," she said.

Tiny pellets could remain undetected

Intelligence findings say the pellets would be so small — just millimeters across — that they would evade detection by ground-and space-based systems that scan for space objects, which could make it hard to pin blame for any attack on Moscow.

Clayton Swope, who specialises in space security and weaponry at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington, DC-based security and policy think tank, said if "the pellets are not trackable, that complicates things" but "people would figure it out."

"If satellites start winking out with damage, I guess you could put two and two together," he said.

Weapon of fear' could threaten chaos

Starlink's orbits are about 550 kilometers (340 miles) above the planet. China's Tiangong space station and the International Space Station operate at lower orbits, "so both would face risks," according to Swope.

The space chaos that such a weapon could cause might enable Moscow to threaten its adversaries without actually having to use it, Swope said.

"They've (Russia) invested a huge amount of time and money and human power into being, you know, a space power," she said.

Using such a weapon "would effectively cut off space for them as well," Samson said. "I don't know that they would be willing to give up that much." *—PTI*

Malaysian court denies ex-PM's house arrest plea

KUALA LUMPUR, 22 DEC

A Malaysian court on Monday rejected former prime minister Najib Razak's bid to serve the remainder of his graft sentence under house arrest. The 72-year-old former prime minister will serve the remainder of his term in prison, scheduled to end in August 2028 after the Pardons Board cut the 12-year sentence by half last year. Najib is serving imprisonment in a case linked to the multibillion-dollar looting of the 1MDB state fund that toppled his government in 2018. He was sentenced to 12 years in prison in 2020 for abuse of power, criminal breach of trust and money laundering involving 42 million ringgit channeled into his bank accounts from SRC International, a former unit of 1MDB. He began his sentence in August 2022. *—PTI*

PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA

Nicki Minaj praises 'dashing' Trump, 'assassin' Vance

PHOENIX, 22 DEC

US rapper Nicki Minaj on Sunday drew attention at a conservative gathering in Arizona, where she praised "handsome and dashing" President Donald Trump as a role model for young men but sparked controversy by mistakenly referring to Vice President JD Vance as an "assassin". Minaj was speaking at Turning Point USA's AmericaFest convention, where she was interviewed by Erika Kirk, the widow of conservative activist Charlie Kirk. The moment turned awkward when, while attempting to praise Vance's political skills, she said: "Dear young men, you have amazing role models like the assassin, JD Vance, our vice president." Minaj paused immediately, appearing to regret the word choice, placing her hand over her mouth as murmurs rippled through the crowd. *—Agencies*

WSJ's parent firm on trial in Hong Kong

HONG KONG, 22 DEC

Former Wall Street Journal reporter, Selina Cheng, is testifying in Hong Kong against Dow Jones Publishing, alleging wrongful termination linked to her union activities. Cheng, who chairs the Hong Kong Journalists Association, initiated a private investigation after her dismissal in July 2024. She claims her job loss correlated with her refusal to withdraw from a union election. Dow Jones faces two charges under the Employment Ordinance, both of which it pleads not guilty to. The case, highlighting deteriorating press freedoms in Hong Kong, comes amid controversial national security laws that have curtailed media operations in the region. *—PTI*

Power restored in most San Francisco areas after outage

SAN FRANCISCO, 22 DEC

Power was restored on Sunday to most of the 1,30,000 homes and businesses in San Francisco hit by a massive outage a day earlier. About 17,000 customers remained without power as of Sunday, said Pacific Gas and Electric Co. PG&E said earlier, its working to restore electricity in several neighbourhoods and small areas of downtown San Francisco after Saturday's outage. PG&E, in a statement, said it expects to restore power to the remaining customers by 2 pm on Monday. "The damage from the fire in our substation was extensive, and repairs will be complex," the utility said. The outage, which occurred shortly after 1 pm on Saturday, left much of the northern part of the city without power. At its peak, the outage represented roughly one-third of the utility company's customers in the city. *— PTI*

B'desh still on edge as 21 arrested for lynching

Minority groups protest govt's failure to end violence

Sharif Osman Hadi **PHOTO: X**

DHAKA, 22 DEC

Minority groups in Bangladesh held a protest on Monday over the interim government's failure to prevent the persecution of minorities, as authorities arrested 21 suspects linked to the lynching of a Hindu man.

Leaders of Hindu and other minority groups formed a human chain in Dhaka protesting the lynching of Dipu Chandra Das, saying the interim government failed to stop violence, killings and persecution of minorities.

Das, a garment factory worker in Mymensingh, was dragged out by a mob and lynched on Thursday. His body was set on fire.

His killing sparked widespread protests by factory workers, students and rights organisations.

- Leaders of minority groups formed a human chain in Dhaka, protesting the lynching, saying the interim government failed to stop violence, killings and persecution of minorities.

"He (interim head, Muhammad Yunus) claims he will build a humane Bangladesh, but in reality, he is an inhumane chief adviser,"Joint Coordinator of the Minority Unity Front Manindra Kumar Nath told protesters.

The Hindus of Bangladesh has been affected by violence after the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024.

Meanwhile, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) arrested 10 suspects over the lynching of Das. Later, police arrested two more suspects.

The office of the interim government chief, who earlier described Das's killing a "brutal crime," said on Monday that nine people were arrested for the attack on the 'Prothom Alo' and 'Daily Star' newspapers, and urged restraint. Mob violence gripped the Bangladesh capital and other major cities after radical right-wing Inqilab Mancha group leader Sharif Osman Hadi, who was shot in the head on 12 December in Dhaka, died at a Singapore Hospital last week. Motaleb Shikder, a leader of the violent student-led 2024 uprising in Khulna, was shot in the head on Monday injuring him seriously. *—PTI*

Russian general Fanil Sarvarov killed by a bomb detonated underneath his car in Moscow, on Monday **PHOTO: SCREENGRAB**

Russian general killed by bomb placed under his car

MOSCOW, 22 DEC

A Russian general was killed on Monday after an explosive device detonated underneath his car in Moscow. Investigators allege Ukraine could be behind the attack. This is the third such killing of a senior military officer in a year.

Lt. Gen. Fanil Sarvarov, head of the Operational Training Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces' General Staff, died of his injuries, said Svetlana Petrenko, the spokesperson for Russia's Investigative Committee, the nation's top criminal investigation agency.

"Investigators are pursuing numerous lines. One of these is that the crime was orchestrated by Ukrainian Intelligence," Petrenko said.

The Defence Ministry said that Sarvarov had earlier fought in Chechnya and taken part in Moscow's campaign in Syria.

Just over a year ago, on 17 December 2024, Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the chief of the military's nuclear, biological and chemical protection forces, was killed by a bomb hidden on an electric scooter outside his apartment building. Kirillov's assistant also died. Ukraine's security service claimed responsibility for the attack.

An Uzbek man was quickly arrested and charged with killing Kirillov on behalf of the Ukrainian security service.

In April, Russian military officer, Lt. Gen. Yaroslav Moskalik, deputy head of the main operational department in the General Staff, was killed by an explosive placed in his car parked near his apartment building just outside Moscow. A suspect was quickly arrested. *— PTI*

DOJ restores Trump's photo in Epstein files, after major outcry

WASHINGTON, 22 DEC

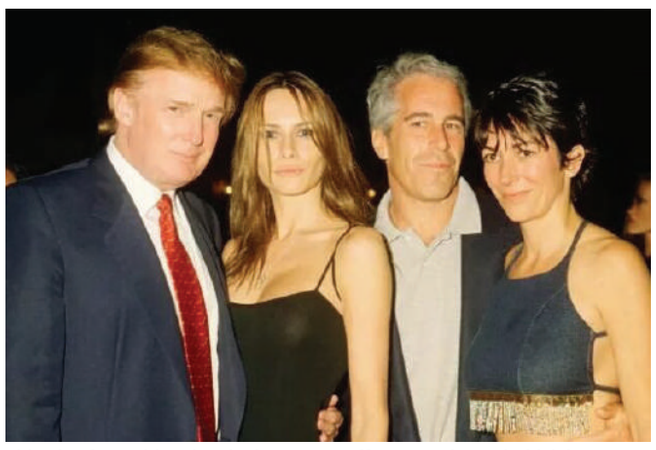
Items from the Epstein files, including a photograph featuring United States President Donald Trump, were briefly removed from the United States Department of Justice website after concerns were raised by victims, the Deputy Attorney General said on Sunday.

The image, which included Trump, was later reinstated following a review, Todd Blanche, Deputy Attorney General, confirmed. Blanche rejected claims that the removal was politically motivated, stating that the photograph also contained unredacted images of women, prompting concerns over victim protection.

At least 16 files, drawn from thousands of documents related to the late convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein that were released on Friday, had disappeared from the website without explanation by Saturday. The unexplained removals sparked criticism from opposition lawmakers.

Democrats on the House Oversight Committee questioned the decision in a social media post, asking Attorney General Pam Bondi what else might be "covered up". The episode added to scrutiny surrounding the handling of the sensitive material.

The Department of Justice later said on X that the photograph featuring Trump had been flagged by the Southern District of New York for potential further action to protect victims. *—PTI*



This pic of Donald and Melania Trump, Jeffrey Epstein, and Ghislaine Maxwell together was deleted and then restored **PHOTO: X**

Indian-origin Singaporean held for hoax

SINGAPORE, 22 DEC

An Indian-origin Singaporean was charged on Monday with making false terrorist threat at a church where all services for the day were canceled, The incident took place on Sunday.

Kokulananthan Mohan, 26, was charged with under Regulation 8(2)(a) of the United Nations (Anti-terrorism Measures) Regulations, after a suspicious item was found at the St Joseph's Church in the Upper Bukit Timah region.

Mohan is accused of placing three cardboard rolls "filled with stone pebbles and sporting protruding red wires, held together using black and yellow adhesive tapes" in the church at about 7.11 am on Sunday.

This was done to create a false fear that the item was likely to explode.

"Investigations indicate that the man had staged the incident by placing an item which resembled an improvised explosive device on the church premises," the Singapore Police Force (SPF) said.

"He is believed to have acted alone, and there is no evidence suggesting that it was an act of terror," the police reported. *— PTI*

Bondi Beach shooter trained with dad: Cops

MELBOURNE, 22 DEC

A man accused of killing 15 people on Sydney's Bondi Beach conducted firearms training outside Sydney with his father, Australian police documents released on Monday said.

The men recorded a video about their justification for the attack, according to a police statement of facts that was made public following Naveed Akram's video court appearance Monday from a Sydney hospital where he is being treated for an abdominal injury.

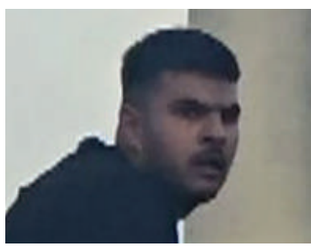
Police wounded Akram at the scene of the 14 December shooting and killed his father, Sajid Akram.

The New South Wales government confirmed Akram was transferred on Monday from a hospital to a prison.

The statement says Akram and his father began their attack by throwing four improvised explosive devices towards a crowd celebrating a Jewish event on Bondi Beach, but the devices failed to explode.

Police described the devices as three aluminium pipe bombs and a tennis ball bomb containing an explosive, black powder and steel ball bearings. None detonated, but police described them as "viable" IEDs.

Authorities have charged Akram with 59 offences, including 15 counts of murder, 40 counts of causing injury with intent to murder and one count of committing a terrorist act. *— PTI*



- Naveed and Sajid Akram recorded a video about with their justification for the Bondi Beach attack, which claimed the lives of 15 during a celebration for the first day of Hannukah

ICE agent fires shots at man after being hit by SUV

An Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent fired at a Cuban immigrant living in the US illegally after the man struck the agent with an SUV in Minnesota's capital, the Department of Homeland Security said. The man also bit an ICE agent as officers subdued him outside his apartment in St. Paul, Assistant Homeland Security Secretary Tricia McLaughlin said. The man wasn't hurt, and the ICE agents' injuries were not life-threatening. *—PTI*

CBS pulls out '60 Minute' segment on El Salvador

Just a day and a half before broadcast, CBS News Editor-in-Chief Bari Weiss pulled out a planned '60 Minutes' investigation into alleged abuses at an El Salvador detention centre used by the Trump administration to house Venezuelan migrants. Weiss told colleagues the segment could not air without an on-the-record comment from a Trump official. The move drew internal criticism, with correspondent Sharyn Alfonsi calling it a "political" rather than editorial decision. *—Salar News*

Pak defense chief Asim Munir was conferred Saudi Arabia's highest civilian honour, the King Abdulaziz Medal of Excellence **PHOTO: X**

MUNIR FELT 'DIVINE INTERVENTION' DURING OP SINDOOR

ISLAMABAD, 22 DEC

Pakistan's Chief of Defence Forces, Field Marshal Asim Munir, claimed the country received "divine intervention" during its four-day military confrontation with India in May, while also issuing a blunt warning to Afghanistan's Taliban over cross-border terrorism. His remarks come months after India carried out Operation Sindoor, targeting terror infrastructure in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

While addressing the National Ulema Conference, Munir drew parallels between Pakistan and the Islamic state established by the Prophet 1,400 years ago, saying Pakistan had been honoured with the role of protector of the Haramain Sharifain, Mecca and, Medina. Turning to Afghanistan, he urged the Taliban to choose between Pakistan and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, claiming 70 per cent of militants infiltrating Pakistan were Afghan nationals.

Munir honoured in Saudi

Separately, Munir was conferred Saudi Arabia's highest civilian honour, the King Abdulaziz Medal of Excellence, during an official visit to the Kingdom. Saudi leaders praised his professionalism and commitment to bilateral ties. Munir reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to the Kingdom's security, and held talks with Saudi Defence Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman on regional security, defence cooperation and strategic challenges. *—PTI*

130 abducted schoolchildren freed

ABUJA, 22 DEC

Some 130 schoolchildren and staff abducted from a Nigerian Catholic school last month by gunmen have been released, police said Sunday.

Gunmen seized at least 303 schoolchildren and 12 teachers in Nigeria's north-central Niger state when they attacked the St. Mary's Catholic School in the Papiri community on 21 November.

Fifty kids escaped in the hours that followed, and 100 schoolchildren were freed earlier this month.

Niger police spokesperson Wasiu Abiodun said in a statement that "the remaining abducted students" has now been released.

When asked about the 35 unaccounted-for schoolchildren and missing teachers, Abiodun said, "Details will be communicated."

No group has claimed responsibility for the abduction, but locals blamed armed gangs that target schools and for ransoms in Nigeria's north. *— PTI*

130 abducted Nigerian pupils released, none left in captivity. **PHOTO: X**

15YRS AFTER FUKUSHIMA TRAGEDY

Japan to restart world's biggest nuclear power plant

TOKYO, 22 DEC

Japanese authorities have approved the restart of the world's largest nuclear power plant, marking a pivotal step in the country's effort to shift away from fossil fuels.

The Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant in Niigata Prefecture has been dormant for over a decade following the 2011 Fukushima disaster, which saw widespread reactor shutdowns nationwide.

On Monday, Niigata's prefectural assembly passed a bill clearing the way for Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) to restart one of the plant's seven reactors. The plant, located about 220 km northwest of Tokyo, was among 54 reactors closed after the earthquake and tsunami that crippled Fukushima Daiichi. This will be the power company's first reactor restart since the catastrophe.

Public opinion remains deeply divided. Around 300 protesters gathered outside the assembly, holding "No Nukes" placards, chanting slogans and singing Furusato, a song associated with homeland ties.

A survey in October found 60 per cent of residents felt conditions for a restart had not been met, while nearly 70 per cent expressed doubts about TEPCO's management.

NHK reported the first reactor could restart on 20 January, though this is unconfirmed. Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi supports nuclear restarts to reduce dependence on imported fossil fuels, which generate about 70 per cent of electricity. Japan spent 10.7 trillion yen (£61 billion) on energy imports last year and aims to raise nuclear shares to 20 per cent by 2040. *—Agencies*

China denounces US seizure of Venezuelan oil

BEIJING, 22 DEC

Beijing has condemned the US military's recent seizure of Venezuelan oil tankers in international waters, calling it a serious violation of international law. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian responded to questions regarding the US Coast Guard's action on 20 December, which involved a tanker allegedly belonging to a "shadow fleet." "The arbitrary seizure of foreign vessels by the United States constitutes a serious violation of international law," Lin stated. He added, "China always opposes illegal unilateral sanctions that lack a basis in international law and are not authorised by the UN Security Council." Venezuela, according to Lin, has the right to develop mutually beneficial cooperation with other nations.

The US has significantly increased its military presence near Venezuela, with President Donald Trump labelling the Maduro regime as a "foreign terrorist organisation" and enforcing a "total and complete blockade" on sanctioned oil tankers. US actions are viewed as a direct threat to Venezuela's economic lifeline and have raised alarms in Beijing. *—PTI*

Rupee falls 1P, closes at 89.68 against USD

MUMBAI, 22 DEC

The rupee pared initial gains and settled for the day in the negative territory, slightly down by 1 paisa at 89.68 against the US dollar on Monday, as the support from positive domestic equities was negated by a recovery in crude oil prices. Forex traders said the lack of progress in the US-India trade negotiations weighed on the sentiment, while a weak tone in the US dollar index supported the domestic unit at lower levels. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 89.53 against the greenback, then touched an intra-day high of 89.45, registering a 22-paise gain from its previous close. At the end of the trading session on Monday, the rupee was quoted at 89.68, down 1 paisa from its previous close. On Friday, the rupee appreciated by 53 paise to close at 89.67 against the US dollar. Meanwhile, the dollar index was trading 0.08 per cent lower at 98.52. —*PTI*

Ather to hike EV prices up to ₹3,000

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Electric two-wheeler manufacturer Ather Energy announced on Monday that it will hike prices of its scooter lineup up to Rs 3,000 across models from 1 January 2026, citing a rise in input costs and adverse forex impact. The increase comes as raw material, foreign exchange, and key electronics component prices rise globally, Ather Energy said in a statement. The company's current product portfolio includes the '450 Series' of performance scooters and the family scooter 'Rizta', with starting prices ranging from Rs 1.15 lakh to Rs 1.83 lakh. Ather Energy is currently offering its 'Electric December' scheme with benefits of up to Rs 20,000 across select cities, including Bengaluru, Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Pune, Chennai, Ahmedabad, and Kochi. —*PTI*

Tata Group's Taj debuts in Cairo with 300 rooms

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Tata group hospitality firm Indian Hotels Company Ltd on Monday announced the signing of a Taj hotel in Cairo, marking the brand's debut in Egypt. The 300-room Taj Cairo will be located at Opera Square, in the heart of the capital and will offer an all-day dining, specialty restaurants, wellness facilities as well as banqueting spaces for corporate meetings and social gatherings, Indian Hotels Company Ltd (IHCL) said in a statement. "Debuting the iconic Taj brand in Cairo aligns with IHCL's international growth strategy of being present in key gateway cities of the world and extending the brand's hallmark warm and sincere service," IHCL Managing Director & CEO, Puneet Chhatwal, said. The property is owned by the Egyptian General Company for Tourism & Hotels (EGOTH). —*PTI*

Core infrastructure sectors rise 1.8% in November

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

India's eight key infrastructure sectors grew at a slower pace of 1.8 per cent in November against 5.8 per cent in the same month last year, amid a dip in production of crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, and electricity, according to official data released on Monday. The performance of these sectors, however, improved month-on-month, the data showed. The output of eight core industries -- coal, crude oil, natural gas, petroleum, refinery products, electricity, fertiliser, and steel -- contracted by (-) 0.1 per cent in October this year. During the April-November period of this fiscal, the output of these sectors grew by 2.4 per cent against 4.4 per cent in the same period last fiscal. —*PTI*

NZ trade pact to give 5,000 job visas to Indians annually

The pact is expected to help Indian businesses expand in NZ

PHOTO: AI

INDIA-NZ FTA HIGHLIGHTS

Here are the highlights of the India-New Zealand free trade agreement:

- Zero Duty market access on 100% of India's exports
- India offered 70% tariff liberalisation for 95% India-NZ trade
- This will benefit textiles, apparel, leather, footwear, marine products, gems and jewellery
- Temporary employment entry visa for 5,000 professionals and 1,000 work & holiday visas
- NZ to invest $20 billion in 15 years
- Agricultural Partnerships for Apples, Kiwifruit, and Honey
- Duty-free inputs for Indian mfg sector

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

A key feature of the India-New Zealand FTA is expanded access in the services sector, particularly skilled mobility.

New Zealand will introduce a Temporary Employment Entry Visa pathway for Indian professionals, allowing up to 5,000 visas annually with a maximum stay of three years at any given time.

The visa pathway will cover AYUSH practitioners, yoga instructors, Indian chefs and music teachers, along with professionals from high-demand sectors such as IT, engineering, healthcare, education and construction. Officials said the move would significantly strengthen services trade, people-to-people ties and workforce mobility between the two countries.

The agreement comes at a critical time for Indian exporters seeking diversification amid the impact of high tariffs imposed by the Trump administration on Indian goods. The pact is expected to help Indian businesses expand their footprint in the Oceania region, building on India's existing trade agreement with Australia and reducing dependence on traditional markets.

Beyond tariff liberalisation, the FTA addresses non-tariff barriers through enhanced regulatory cooperation, streamlined customs procedures, and stronger sanitary and phytosanitary measures. India's pharmaceutical and medical devices sectors are set to benefit from faster regulatory approvals, as New Zealand will accept GMP and GCP inspection reports from trusted regulators, including the US FDA, EU's EMA and the UK's MHRA.

"This will reduce duplicative inspections, lower compliance costs and speed up product approvals," the commerce ministry said, adding that it would improve the competitiveness of Indian exporters. New Zealand will also launch a dedicated Agri-Technology Action Plan focusing on kiwifruit, apples and honey.

Bilateral merchandise trade stood at USD 1.3 billion in 2024-25, while total trade reached USD 2.4 billion, driven largely by travel, IT and business services. —*PTI*

NIFTY SETTLES ABOVE 26,100

Sensex rallies 638 points amid firm global trends

MUMBAI, 22 DEC

Benchmark Sensex jumped by 638 points while the broader Nifty closed above 26,100 on Monday following heavy buying in IT, auto and metal shares amid foreign fund inflows and a rally in global markets on hopes of further rate cuts by the US Federal Reserve.

Building on the previous session's rally, the 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 638.12 points or 0.75 per cent to settle at 85,567.48. During the day, it surged 671.97 points or 0.79 per cent to 85,601.33.

The 50-share NSE Nifty climbed 206 points or 0.79 per cent to close above the 26,100 mark at 26,172.40.

Among Sensex firms, Trent rose the most by 3.56 per cent. IT shares Infosys jumped 3.06 per cent, Tech Mahindra by 2.09 per cent, HCL Tech by 1.67 per cent and TCS by 1.28 per cent. Bharti Airtel, Bharat Electronics, Tata Motors, Reliance and Maruti were among the major movers.

However, State Bank of India fell the most by 0.6 per cent, followed by Kotak Mahindra Bank, Larsen & Toubro and Titan.

The BSE smallcap gauge jumped 1.12 per cent, while midcap index climbed 0.86 per cent.

All sectoral indices ended higher. IT surged 1.99 per cent, BSE Focused IT by 1.72 per cent, capital goods by 1.65 per cent, industrials by 1.33 per cent, metal by 1.32 per cent and commodities by 1.05 per cent.

A total of 2,796 stocks advanced while 1,514 declined and 191 remained unchanged on the BSE. —*PTI*

Gold jumps to record high of '1.38L/10g; silver hits new peak

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Gold prices rose to a fresh lifetime high of Rs 1,38,200 per 10g, gaining Rs 1,685, in the national capital on Monday following the precious metal scaling record highs in the global markets, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

Silver prices also raced to hit an all-time high of Rs 2,14,500 per kilogramme (inclusive of all taxes) in the capital, up by Rs 10,400 per kg.

"Bullish momentum extended in bullion, with gold and silver surging to another fresh record high on Monday," Saumil Gandhi, Senior Analyst - Commodities at HDFC Securities, said.

In the international markets, spot gold increased by USD 80.85, or 1.86 per cent, to hit a record of USD 4,420.35 per ounce.

"Investor interest in silver and gold has grown considerably as interest rates are going down in the US, fiscal concerns are growing, and the American economy is becoming more uncertain," Gandhi said.

He added that this has led to a shift towards the safe-haven asset. In addition, the demand for safe haven also increased, due to the escalating geopolitical tensions.

Spot silver appreciated by USD 2.31, or 3.44 per cent, to hit a lifetime high of USD 69.45 per ounce in the overseas markets. —*PTI*

Satcom will improve farm decision-making: Deloitte

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Data from satellite communication (Satcom), when combined with on-ground insights, has the potential to significantly improve decision-making in Indian agriculture, boosting accuracy from 50 per cent to an estimated 70-75 per cent within the next four to years.

Kuchibhotla Srinivas, Partner at Deloitte India, highlighted that satellite interventions are currently delivering around 50 per cent precision.

He emphasised that while satellite imagery is pivotal in monitoring soil fertility, crop health, and yield forecasting, it only offers a macro-level overview.

Srinivas noted the food and agribusiness sector in India is valued at over $750 billion and has been growing in double digits for over a decade.

As digital technologies reshape agriculture, emerging trends such as artificial intelligence and drones are expected to enhance pest and disease management, potentially reducing crop output losses substantially —*ANI*

RBI MAY REDUCE REPO RATE BY 25 BPS TO 5% IN FEBRUARY: UNION BANK OF INDIA

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) may reduce the repo rate by 25 basis points to 5 per cent in its upcoming February monetary policy meeting, according to a report from Union Bank of India. The report suggests that there is potential for a final rate cut either in February or April 2026, given the RBI's dovish policy stance and references to "benign inflation conditions and subdued underlying price pressures."

Adjusting for the impact of around 50 bps inflation from gold, the report states that inflation pressures appear even more moderate. "We see scope for a final 25 bps rate cut in Feb or April 2026," it noted, while also emphasising the uncertainty regarding timing due to an impending revision of the Consumer Price Index and Gross Domestic Product base years in February 2026.

In its December meeting, the MPC cut the policy repo rate by 25 basis points to 5.25 per cent . The next MPC meeting is scheduled for 4-6 February 2026. —*ANI*

Varun Beverages to acquire SA's Twizza for ₹1,118.7 cr

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Varun Beverages Limited (VBL), PepsiCo's largest franchise bottler, said it will fully acquire South Africa-based beverage company 'Twizza' through its local subsidiary, BevCo (The Beverages Company Proprietary Limited). The acquisition will be at an enterprise value of ZAR 2,095 million (Rs 1,118.7 crore). The transaction is expected to be completed on or before 30 June 2026, VBL said in a regulatory filing

The acquisition will enable BevCo to penetrate deeper into the South Africa market through Twizza's three manufacturing facilities located in Cape Town, Queenstown and Middelburg.

In March 2024, VBL wholly acquired South Africa's BevCo and its subsidiaries. Continuing its African expansion, followed by a ZAR 2.83 billion (Rs 1,521.46 crore) deal in November to purchase PepsiCo's bottling businesses in Tanzania and Ghana.

Varun Beverages is one of PepsiCo's largest franchisees outside the United States, the company said. This is in addition to its existing distribution agreement for PepsiCo's snacks portfolio, including Lay's, Cheetos and Doritos, in Morocco. In 2024, Varun Beverages reported revenue of Rs 20,007.7 crore and sold 1,124 million cases globally. —*PTI*

Sarla Aviation tests electric air taxi at Bengaluru facility

MUMBAI, 22 DEC

Aerospace startup Sarla Aviation plans to roll out electric air taxis for local commuting by 2028 and has begun ground testing of its air taxi programme at its Bengaluru manufacturing facility. The development places India among a small group of countries working on next-generation vertical flight systems at an industrial scale.

The startup has raised USD 13 million (around Rs 116 crore) across its pre-seed and seed rounds in 2024, followed by a Series A round in January 2025 led by Accel and Zerodha co-founder Nikhil Kamath

Achieved in approximately nine months of development and at a fraction of the capital typically required for comparable global programs, the company claimed. The current demonstrator is a functional sub-scale aircraft, purpose-built to validate structural behaviour, propulsion integration, and system-level safety architecture at a meaningful scale. The aircraft is currently the largest and most advanced private demonstrator under development in India. The company said its technology roadmap targets helicopter-class mission endurance, while reducing cost, operational complexity, and safety trade-offs through electric propulsion and integrated systems design. —*PTI*

BharatPe & YES BANK launch 'Pay Later with BharatPe'

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

BharatPe, one of India's leading fintech company, in partnership with YES BANK, on Monday announced the launch of 'Pay Later with BharatPe' Credit on UPI, powered by NPCI. According to a company statement, 'Pay Later with BharatPe' consumers can now make payments using a Credit Line across all merchant touchpoints. This includes scanning any UPI QR code, shopping online, or paying for recharges, or bill payments on the BharatPe app. It offers instant UPI credit with zero paperwork or delays, allowing users to spend daily and repay monthly either in full or via flexible 3-12 month EMIs.
Nalin Negi, CEO-BharatPe said, "Credit penetration in India remains low, especially for small merchants and new-to-credit consumers. With 'Pay Later with BharatPe', we are unlocking a massive opportunity to deliver a compliant, scalable, and convenient credit solution that addresses both merchant's and consumer's spending needs."
Anil Singh, Country Head, Credit Cards & Merchant Acquiring, YES BANK, said, "YES BANK is a significant player in UPI ecosystem. We are excited to partner with BharatPe to deliver credit on UPI solutions at scale." —*ANI*

INDIAN-ORIGIN AMAZON VETERAN

Anand Varadarajan named Starbucks CTO

HOUSTON, 22 DEC

- SAt Amazon, Varadarajan spent close to 19 years building large-scale, customer-focused technology platforms, most recently overseeing technology and supply chain for its Worldwide Grocery

Starbucks has appointed Indian-origin technology executive **Anand Varadarajan** as its new executive vice president and chief technology officer (CTO), tapping a nearly two-decade Amazon veteran to lead its global technology operations.

Varadarajan will take charge on 19 January, joining the company's Executive Leadership Team and reporting directly to Chief Executive Officer Brian Niccol, Starbucks said. He succeeds Deb Hall Lefevre, who retired in September.

At Amazon, Varadarajan spent close to 19 years building large-scale, customer-focused technology platforms, most recently overseeing technology and supply chain for its Worldwide Grocery Stores business. Earlier, he worked as a software engineer at Oracle and with several startups.

Starbucks said Varadarajan brings deep experience in developing secure, reliable systems and scaling technology to support operational excellence while keeping customers at the centre.

An alumnus of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Varadarajan holds a master's degree in civil engineering from Purdue University and a master's degree in computer science from the University of Washington.

Starbucks said Varadarajan's appointment is expected to accelerate its technology initiatives and strengthen digital capabilities across its global busi-

Japan's new flagship H3 rocket fails to lauch

TOKYO, 22 DEC

Japan's space agency said its H3 rocket carrying a navigation satellite failed to put the payload into a planned orbit, a setback for the country's new flagship rocket and its space launch program.

Monday's failure is the second for Japan's new flagship rocket after its botched 2023 debut flight and six successful flights.

The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency said the H3 rocket carrying the Michibiki 5 satellite took off from the Tanegashima Space Center on a southwestern Japanese island Monday as part of Japan's plans to have a more precise location positioning system of its own.

The rocket's second-stage engine burn unexpectedly had a premature cutoff and a subsequent separation of the satellite from the rocket could not be confirmed, Masashi Okada, a JAXA executive and launch director, told a news conference.

Monday's failure is a setback for Japan's new flagship that replaced the earlier mainstay H-2A which had near-perfect success record. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Ankush pips Babuta to claim men's 10m air rifle gold

BHOPAL, 22 DEC

Navy's Kiran Ankush Jadhav held off the challenge of Olympian Arjun Babuta to clinch the gold medal in the men's 10m air rifle event at the 68th National Shooting Championship here on Monday. Jadhav finished with 252.1 to claim top-of-the-podium place ahead of Babuta, who secured silver with 251.4, while reigning 50m rifle 3 positions national champion Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar bagged bronze with 229.8. In the men's 10m air rifle junior final, Gujarat's Mohammed Murtaza Vania delivered an authoritative display to secure the gold medal with 254.3. Abhinav Shaw of West Bengal claimed the silver with 251.6, while Onkar Vikas Waghamare finished third with 230.1 to earn the bronze medal.—*PTI*

Schroder's late OT three-pointer lifts Kings past Rockets

NEW YORK, 22 DEC

Dennis Schroder swished a 3-pointer with 2.2 seconds left in overtime to give the Sacramento Kings a dramatic 125-124 victory over the visiting Houston Rockets on Sunday night. Schroder had 24 points, 10 assists, and seven rebounds off the bench as Sacramento rebounded from a 14-point, fourth-quarter deficit to halt a five-game losing streak. DeMar DeRozan had 27 points and nine assists, and Keegan Murray scored 26 for the Kings, who won for just the seventh time in 29 games this season. Russell Westbrook had 21 points and 13 rebounds and nailed a 3-pointer to force overtime with 14.2 seconds remaining. Alperen Sengun scored 28 points, and Kevin Durant added 24 points.—*PTI*

Pak to reward U-19 team 10 million for AC title run

KARACHI, 22 DEC

Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif on Monday announced a special cash award of 10 million rupees for Pakistan's U19 Asia Cup-winning squad members. The Pakistan colts thumped India by 191 runs on Sunday to claim the title.Sharif announced at a reception for the team and officials in Islamabad, where he lauded the team's performance. Sarfaraz Ahmed, the mentor and manager of the team, told the media after the reception that the Prime Minister has announced a cash award of 10 million (Approx USD 36,000) to each of the players.—*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Connolly to open batting anywhere in IPL for PBKS

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Punjab Kings' latest recruit, Australian all-rounder Cooper Connolly, prides himself on being versatile and is open to batting at any position the team deems fit in his maiden IPL season next year. Known for his aggressive batting, sharp fielding, and handy left-arm spin, Connolly was snapped up by Punjab Kings for Rs 3 crore at the mini-auction earlier this month. "I like to model my game on being able to be versatile in any position. So whether that's at three, whether that's in the middle, I'm happy to perform any role," Connolly said at a virtual media interaction on Monday. The 22-year-old has been in sensational form for Perth Scorchers, scoring two blistering fifties in the ongoing Big Bash League.—*PTI*

Duffy, Ajaz rip through WI as NZ seal series 2-0

Black Caps climb to second; India drops to sixth

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, 22 DEC

Duffy's five-for42 triggers West Indies collapse as New Zealand seal Test series 2-0 *PHOTO: PTI*

Jacob Duffy took 5-42 as New Zealand bowled out the West Indies for 138 on a deteriorating fifth-day pitch to win the third test by 323 runs Monday and take the three-match series 2-0.

So the spinner they brought in specifically for this Test match was offered centre stage. Ajaz Patel, so often peripheral to the team's needs at home, was generating 15.8 degrees of turn. That was part of why Hope thought he was safe against a ball delivered from well wide of the crease. Ordinarily, it might have pitched harmlessly and spun away harmlessly, but the crosswind caught hold of it - as Ajaz had intended, because all game he was looping it up at 70kph or so - and it careened into the right-hander's front toe."I saw that list at lunchtime, and there were some cool names on there, so to be up there on any sort of list with those sort of names was special," Duffy, who was voted Player of the Series, said of his bowling record.

New Zealand climbed to second in the ICC Test World Championship 2025–27 standings after it beat West Indies 2-0 in a three-match series.

With New Zealand surging ahead, India drops down to sixth in the standings.

West Indies is bottom of the table with no wins from eight Tests in the ongoing cycle.

Australia continues to lead the points table, after it beat England in the first three Tests to retain the Ashes. The Aussies have won all six of the Tests they have played in this cycle.

New Zealand's win ended a series in which both teams had to cope with significantly depleted pace attacks and in which a slew of batting records fell.

The West Indies were without Shamar Joseph and Alzarri Joseph. Duffy became New Zealand's pace spearhead after injuries sidelined Matt Henry, Will O'Rourke, Ben Sears, Kyle Jamieson, Nathan Smith, and Blair Tickner.

West Indies captain Roston says he let team down

West Indies Test captain Roston Chase said Monday he felt he had let his team down with his performances in its 2-0 series loss to New Zealand.

New Zealand wrapped up the series victory with a 323-run win on the final day of the third Test at Mount Maunganui, after an earlier draw in Christchurch and a win in Wellington.

Chase took over the captaincy in March, with his team registering seven losses and a draw in his eight matches in charge.

New Zealand 575 for 8 dec (Conway 227, Latham 137, Ravindra 72*, Greaves 2-83) and 306 for 2 dec (Latham 101, Conway 100, Hodge 2-80) beat West Indies 420 (Hodge 123*, King 63, Duffy 4-86) and 43 for 0 (King 67, Duffy 5-42, Ajaz 3-23) by 323 runs. —*PTI*

2ND WT20I

India look to consolidate lead against Sri Lanka

VISAKHAPATNAM, 22 DEC

The Indian women's cricket team will look to raise its fielding standards by a few notches and build on a comprehensive opening win when it squares off against Sri Lanka in the second WT20I here on Tuesday.

Playing its first international game after a historic World Cup triumph last month, Harmanpreet Kaur's side didn't need to break much sweat in the batting and bowling departments during an eight-wicket win over the island nation.

However, the team's fielding, especially catching, left a lot to be desired despite the bowlers managing to restrict the Lankans to a paltry 121 for 6.

"We are working on our fielding. Don't know why we keep dropping catches. It is wet out here, but it is not an excuse. That is something we really need to think about. In the next match, we will come up with a better approach," skipper Harmanpreet Kaur had said after the match.

The Indian team had a well-deserved six-week break following the World Cup high. The players converged for a week-long camp at the Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru after that.

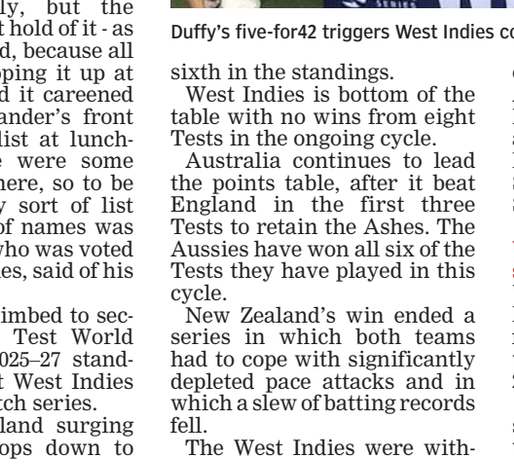
Some rustiness in fielding was pretty much expected, and the seasoned skipper feels that the team will be getting into the groove very soon.

"We are playing after a month. We don't want to unnecessarily challenge ourselves. We just want to do well for the team.

"We just wanted to bowl first and see how it goes. We wanted to show the better approach," Harmanpreet had said. The match starts at 7 pm. —*PTI*

Former Karnataka all-rounder Gowtham announces retirement

BENGALURU, 22 DEC



All-rounder K. Gowtham, architect of many a famous victory for Karnataka, announced his retirement here on Monday.

An off-spinner and attacking batter, Gowtham featured in 59 First-Class and 68 List-A games for Karnataka.

The 37-year-old, a gritty and combative presence on the field, earned one ODI cap for India against Sri Lanka in 2021. Among his memorable performances are an eight-wicket haul against Tamil Nadu in the Ranji Trophy in 2019, which powered Karnataka to an exciting 26-run win. Gowtham's last First-Class fixture came in February 2023.

In the 2019-20 Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy final against Tamil Nadu, Gowtham defended 13 runs in the last over to give his side a one-run victory.

Gowtham made history as the most expensive uncapped player in IPL history when he was signed by Chennai Super Kings (CSK) for Rs. 9.25 crore at the 2021 auction.

In 2018, Gowtham was signed for Rs. 6.2 crore by Rajasthan Royals (RR). Gowtham spoke with pride about representing Karnataka for the entirety of his domestic career. —*PTI*

VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY

Shubman Gill, Abhishek, and Arshdeep Singh in Punjab squad

CHANDIGARH, 22 DEC

Indian ODI skipper Shubman Gill, world's No. 1 T20 batter Abhishek Sharma, and pacer Arshdeep Singh were on Monday named in the Punjab squad for the Vijay Hazare Trophy, in line with BCCI's diktat of mandatory participation in the National One-Day Championship.

Gill, who was dropped from India's T20 World Cup squad, and Arshdeep, who is a white-ball regular, might just be available for two to three games, with ODIs against New Zealand set to start on January 11. Punjab, clubbed in group C along with favourites Mumbai, will play their first two games against Maharashtra (24 December) and Chhattisgarh (26 December). These are the games in which Gill and Arshdeep's availability is expected.

Abhishek, who will only be summoned for T20Is, might be available for more games.

The marquee Mumbai vs Punjab match in Jaipur is slated for January 8, and by that time, both Mumbai's Rohit Sharma and Punjab's Gill won't be available. —*PTI*

Ground preparations at Chinnaswamy Stadium, in Bengaluru, on Monday *PHOTO: PTI*

KSCA HAS SOUGHT STATE APPROVAL TO HOST IPL AND VIJAY HAZARE MATCHES

BENGALURU, 22 DEC

The Karnataka State Cricket Association (KSCA) has formally sought permission from the state government to host cricket matches, including Vijay Hazare Trophy fixtures and Indian Premier League (IPL) games, at M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru.

The request has been made by the newly elected KSCA administration, with its president Venkatesh Prasad personally meeting the Chief Minister, Deputy Chief Minister, and Home Minister to urge approval for organising matches at the iconic venue. However, the decision has not been taken immediately. The state Cabinet has left the matter to the discretion of the Home Department, citing the need for strict compliance with safety and security norms. Before granting permission, the government has made it clear that the recommendations of the Justice Michael D'Cunha Commission must be implemented. —*PTI*

Urs to join Jeev at final IGPL Tour in Colombo

COLOMBO, 22 DEC

History-maker and IGPL Mumbai tour amateur winner Pranavi Urs is set to tee off alongside the seasoned Jeev Milkha Singh in the final leg of the IGPL Tour here, a conclusion to a breakthrough inaugural season.

Joining the field for the first time will be former Asian Tour No. 1 Jyoti Randhawa, who, alongside Jeev, plays in the European Legends Tour.

Gaganjeet Bhullar demonstrated his class by winning the opening two events at Chandigarh and Jaypee Greens, whereas SSP Chawrasia, a six-time Asian Tour winner, has also been a consistent presence throughout the season.

Additionally, Bhullar finished third at the IGPL Invitational in Ahmedabad recently after returning from his commitments on the International Series and Asian Tour.

The Order of Merit leader Aman Raj has been the star of the season, capturing victories at both Jaipur and Kolkata. The 30-year-old fired rounds of 9-under 61 three times in just four rounds during that stretch, demonstrating consistency that has propelled him to the top of the standings. —*PTI*

Spain ends year as top team in FIFA men's soccer rankings

ZURICH, 22 DEC

Spain will end 2025 as the top men's team in the FIFA rankings.

There were limited changes in the new rankings published Monday, after the previous standings had been released on Nov. 19.

The top 10 remain unchanged, with, in order, Argentina, France, England, Brazil, Portugal, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany,y and Croatia following Spain.

Spain won World Cup Group E qualifying and will meet Uruguay, Saudi Arabia, and Cape Verde in Group H at the 2026 tournament co-hosted by the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

FIFA said Vietnam, which climbed three places to 107th in the rankings, registered the biggest leap.

The next rankings will be published on 19 Jan. —*PTI*

SAI approves upgrading centres across India

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

The Governing Body of the Sports Authority of India (SAI) on Monday approved a number of infrastructure upgrade projects across the country, including the laying of an eight-lane synthetic athletics track in West Bengal and a climate-neutral hockey turf at its Bengaluru centre.

The SAI's (GB) meeting was chaired by Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya. —*PTI*

AFRICA CUP OF NATIONS

Morocco seals AFCON win against Comoros

NEW DELHI, 22 DEC

Morocco's forward #20 Ayoub El Kaabi scores a goal during the Africa Cup of Nations *PHOTO: X/@AFCON*

A spectacular bicycle kick earned royal approval for Ayoub El Kaabi as host Morocco opened the 35th Africa Cup of Nations with a 2-0 win over Comoros on Sunday night.

Home fans, including Moroccan Crown Prince Moulay Hassan, who greeted the players before kickoff, had endured a frustrating game as the island nation Comoros, ranked 108th in the world, stubbornly held out against one of the tournament favorites. Comoros goalkeeper Yannick Pandor even saved an early penalty from Soufiane Rahimi.

Brahim Díaz finally broke the deadlock in the 55th minute, setting off relieved celebrations around the stadium, before El Kaabi sealed the win with an overhead kick in the 74th.

The prince, watching from his royal box, was unable to conceal his delight as he applauded.

Morocco's quest to become a soccer superpower is a family affair. It was a passion for the prince's grandfather, Hassan II, and the current king, Mohammed VI, who oversaw one of the most aggressive buildouts in African sporting history to achieve his aim. The Kingdom is set to be a main co-host of the 2030 World Cup with Spain and Portugal.

Mohammed VI's portrait was beside Gianni Infantino as the FIFA president proclaimed in French before kickoff, "This will be the best Africa Cup of Nations!"

The only blemish from a Moroccan point of view was an early injury to team captain Romain Saïss, who wiped away tears as he left the field. —*PTI*

Next Gen ATP Finals: Tien wins title in Saudi Arabia

DUBAI, 22 DEC

American Learner Tien overpowered Belgian opponent Alexander Blockx 4-3(4), 4-2, 4-1 to win the Next Gen ATP Finals on Sunday night, the year-ending exhibition tournament between the eight highest-ranked players on the tour aged 20 and under.

The tournament uses a modified format, where a player needs to win four games to clinch a set, and winning one point at deuce is enough to take the game. Tien, who won his first trophy on the tour at the Moselle Open last month, held his nerve and made only 12 unforced errors while Blockx had 23, as the American won the match in just under an hour."I'm really happy. I knew it was going to be a tough match. I don't think (Blockx) missed a serve for the first set-and-a-half. He's been playing great in these conditions all week," said Tien, who lost last year's final to Joao Fonseca. Blockx, who served seven aces while his opponent had only one, made his intentions clear from the start, attacking the left-handed Tien's backhand with a fast serve and running up to the net to apply pressure. —*PTI*